





WESTERN
ROUNDUP

WESTERN ROUNDUP

This volume
contains the
complete books
PILLAR MOUNTAIN
and
PLEASANT JIM

BY MAX BRAND

MAX BRAND

Western
Roundup.

CLEVELAND



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PILLAR MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER I

LOAFER was a big dog who looked like a buffalo wolf; he was gray against one background and pale yellow against another; like a buffalo wolf, he had a great leonine body covered with a loose hide which humped in a wave above his shoulders at every lurch of his gallop. Strangers always said "Wolf!" when they saw him (there were four bullet scars upon him), and no one said "Good dog!" except his master. However, he was too busy most of the time to be bothered by human opinions which, also, seldom came to his ears. On this morning he was hunting on the broad breast of Pillar Mountain not for food but for revenge; his enemy was a lop-eared rabbit.

There never was a time when wolf or wolfish dog could match speed with a Western jack rabbit; but in brains the difference lay on the other side and, since puppyhood, Loafer had been certain that no rabbit could live a week in his domain save by permission. The little darting idiots always could be scared into the waiting teeth. At least, that was his opinion until he encountered Lop-ear; and after that the life of Loafer was poisoned.

Lop-ear was a perfect Achilles among jack rabbits, and he was an Odysseus, also; nothing stirred on the mountains or on the broad desert that he could not

outrun, and there was very little that he could not outthink. Above all, he was familiar with Pillar Mountain, and he grew up to a splendid maturity under the nose of Loafer. They sharpened their wits on one another, like scimitar on scimitar, and each grew great because the other was a proper metal. Yet, victor of a thousand contests with the big dog, swelled with the pride of his own fame, Lop-ear on this morning made a serious mistake. He had filled his belly with newly sprouted twigs, flavored with keen spice, rich with juice, tender as watercress; and now he sat in the sun with his head drawn back upon his shoulders, his eyes a mere glimmering black thread of watchfulness, and his ears fallen flat on his back.

They should have been erect like two towers of watchfulness, drinking in all sound, tenfold more watchful because the south wind was cutting straight up the side of the mountain and blowing away the scent of all who hunted down the slope. Also, the eyes of Lop-ear should have been wide open, so that he could have seen the big stalker, approaching like a great yellow ball of thistledown, soundless, drifting with speed and infinite cunning straight into the eye of the wind.

To Lop-ear, it was like rousing from a nightmare and finding that it is not a dream! When the gray-yellow bolt sprang, Lop-ear hugged the ground one dreadful instant; then with a scream he leaped straight under the head of Loafer. A side rip of those flashing teeth sliced the hip of the rabbit, but he went down the first little cañon so fast that the rocks blurred as

they flew past. For once in his life he had forgotten that he was Lop-ear, and a king, and he consented to take refuge in the common strength of his race—sheer, blinding speed. So he ran like mad, putting in not one spy-hop in twenty, and quite forgot that the cañon traveled in a precise little semicircle.

Loafer did not forget; he had never forgotten, since the day a mountain lion taught him that it is dangerous to sleep even in the broad light of noon on the threshold of the master's house. Now he cantered across the arc of the semicircle and Lop-ear, after a tremendous burst of sprinting, found himself running down the very jaws of his foe. He dodged with a speed that would have made the most famous half-back faint with envy, but the white steel of Loafer's teeth clipped the air just in front of his nose, and therefore he doubled and headed up a difficult slope of broken rock.

That winded him more than ever, and as Lop-ear flung himself down the mountainside, he knew that he was not half a hop, half a thought beyond the reach of death. He cleared the brook from bank to bank at a single glorious bound, but as he landed the teeth clicked at his tail again, and the mind of Lop-ear went black and dizzy, like blown mist at night. The yawning door of the hut seemed to him, at first, some sort of a haven, but it was reeking with the terrible scent of man, so Lop-ear swerved to the side and almost perished again because he did so. Then, knowing that his wind was gone—for he had burned it up like a fool, rather than a wise king—he did the one thing

that remained to him: he dived into a hole that showed under the edge of a jagged rock.

There, in the black depths, he cuddled small and smaller into the moist darkness and prayed to the God who cares for all good rabbits.

Loafer lay down and hung a forepaw as big as the hand of a man into the mouth of the hole. He laughed as he lay, and the wrinkles of laughter made his big hazel eyes small and wicked with delight. For he knew all about that hole. He had known about it ever since he was a little puppy, when he himself had been small enough to escape from the wrathful hand of the master and dodge into this haven. It ran straight down, for a bit, then straightened ahead; and there were two things worth knowing—one was that it filled with water only after the very heaviest rains—the other was that the hole could not be driven deeper, because it ended against solid stone.

So Loafer laughed, and withdrawing his paw, he put his muzzle at the entrance and inhaled the sweet fragrance of steaming rabbit—rabbit steamed in fear, and spiced with the delicately familiar and long-hated scent of Lop-ear himself.

Even children know that good things should be enjoyed slowly, and Loafer was no child. He began first by enlarging the mouth of the hole. Then he inserted his arm to the shoulder, and heard a squeak of terror; the sound went electrically through the body of Loafer; it went sweetly through his soul.

Listening again, he heard frantic scratching. But he knew all about that hole and the consistency of

its walls; therefore he laughed again, and when Lop-ear heard the almost soundless laughter, the scratching stopped. Dreadful, waiting silence began.

After this, with leisure and with system, Loafer enlarged the hole. The whole upper level was porous sand and gravel which he could rip away with his strong claws, and having done that, how simple it would be to reach in and paw out the rabbit! Now and again he paused to listen, but the silence of despair continued in that death-hole; only from the house he heard the young voice of the master singing. How far, how faint, how utterly dim and unreal are the joys of mankind, thought Loafer, and bent afresh to his task.

With both forepaws he labored and the hole ripped wide; then he lay down and his whole shoulder fitted into the aperture, his elbow came to the bottom of the downward shaft, and his right paw touched Lop-ear.

That paw began to tremble with the thundering heartbeats of the victim. He reached farther. He felt the shrinking shoulder and the soft throat of the king of rabbits, but just as he was about to scoop Lop-ear out of the hole he heard a grinding sound, the big rock settled, and drove a sharp stone into his forearm.

He lurched back, but the hole had collapsed, and his arm was held as by a glove. The edged stone worked into his flesh like a tooth; his whole shoulder was being crushed.

Then Loafer forgot the rabbit, and his mind flashed

back to the master as an electric torch picks something from the night. He barked; he whined with pain and fear; and the master stood suddenly above him, leaning with kind, thoughtful face.

"I'll get something for a lever," said the master.

Loafer groaned.

"By heaven," said the master, "it's breaking his leg!"

And he bestrode the jagged rock.

It was as black as iron and almost as heavy. Deeply rooted, massive, it defied his strength. Mightily he heaved, and Loafer saw the feet of the man thrust ankle deep in the yielding gravel. He heard the creak of grinding joints, the snapping of tendons drawn with a merciless power, and then the groan of the master in the full agony of his effort.

The burden which crushed the leg of the dog was lightened. He snatched out his leg. But still the man persisted in his labor as though he did not know the work was done; Loafer limped around and stood before him, looking up into his face, which was mixed red and purple, and running with perspiration. His whole body shook; his breathing was a succession of groans; but the stone began to rise.

That Loafer himself had been saved was one thing; but vaguely the dog understood that something of infinite more importance now was going on. Lop-ear ventured from the hole and fled away unheeded; only from the corner of his eye the dog watched his old enemy flee; but in this mighty work of the raising of the stone, whatever its meaning, he wished to assist.

The roots of the rock worked loose with a sucking sound; the black, wet belly of the stone came slowly up to view; it was poised; it swung to the side and fell, crushing a dozen smaller stones to bits in its fall.

Then the master sank down, also. He lay at full length, moaning, his eyes closed, his body shaken with spasms, and Loafer was filled with terror and amazement. This man was the center of the universe. At his bidding, beyond doubt, the wind blew and the sun rose. He killed afar and gave food to his humble companion. In the blast of summer heat, his hut was cool, and in the winter his red magic gave the house warmth to which Loafer was welcomed. Yet now he lay sick and stricken. When Loafer licked his face he neither spoke nor turned away. When Loafer licked his trembling hands, they made no response, and for the first time the caress of the dog was unreturned.

He crowded close to the youth as though winter cold made him seek for warmth, and lifting his great wrinkled head, Loafer called aloud to the old gods of his people.

There was an immediate response; an arm passed around his neck, and while he whined with joy, the master dragged himself to his knees, to his feet. He stood wavering, and yet he began to laugh.

"I've done it!" he said over and over again; "I've done it."

Then he went into the hut and slumped heavily on to a bunk. Loafer sat beside him, on guard. His mane bristled when he considered what dreadful deeds he would perform for the sake of his master.

CHAPTER II

OLD Oliver Aytoun came home to the shack after dark and found the hut filled with the steam and fragrance of frying venison. Through the smoke of cookery the boy smiled at him, and he smiled in return.

"Have you had a good day, Philip?"

"A very good day, Uncle Oliver."

They said no more. Oliver Aytoun washed his hands and face in a basin of warm water which Philip prepared for him; by the time he had dried himself supper was laid out on the table. It was a good meal of the venison, in place of honor, excellent corn bread, boiled greens, coffee, and plum jam, made from small blue plums which grew wild on the mountain, unmatched for perfume and flavor.

They talked very little. Oliver Aytoun had been delayed because he had walked over a tentative new line for their traps and it had taken him almost to Ransome Peak. Then Philip told how he had spent the morning hauling down saplings by hand from beyond the clearing and piling them behind the house, to make ready for the building of the lean-to.

"This afternoon?"

"I did only one thing," said Philip. "It's a surprise for you."

They smiled at one another again; between them was a beautiful and perfect understanding.

Yet they appeared totally dissimilar, for Oliver Aytoun was a lean man of more than sixty; mountain labor and mountain weather made him appear ten years older in the face and ten years younger in the body. Philip was a mere youth of twenty or so with a great leonine head and a massive throat and shoulders to support it, so that looked at from behind he seemed a formidable man, but viewed in full face his eyes were so large and so blue, his mouth so femininely tender and smiling that he looked less man than child, and rather a simple child, at that.

After the meal, Aytoun sat in the open doorway and watched the shaggy mountain rising up against the stars; Philip washed the tin dishes and the pans, rinsed the dishrag, and hung it on a peg behind the stove to dry. In all that time he only said: "Can you see the lights, Uncle Oliver?"

"I can see them," said Aytoun.

When the work was ended by the sweeping of the floor, Philip sat on the threshold beside the older man and for a long time the silence went on between them, for they were watching the lights. If there was the least water vapor in the air, or a trace of dust, the great valley to the southwest was a dark, deep ocean, but on dry, clear nights such as this, in the great bottom of the bowl they could see the lights of a town glimmering and twinkling busily—like stars, but more yellow, and more alive. To Philip that meant the world of man.

Even on the brightest, clearest day he could not see a trace of the town, though from year to year he had watched the area of the ploughed lands growing in a darker stain each autumn, a larger patch of green each spring. Once the fall ploughing had made only a handful of shadow near the silver streak of the river, but now it extended from foothills to foothills. However, that was a mere spot upon the map, a faint indication, whereas this starry twinkling in the hollow hand of the night stirred the boy with a sense of the flaming souls of men.

He knew nothing but the hut and the mountains. Their only contacts with the world were made by the old man, who twice a year piled their crop of pelts on the backs of the two mules they kept and went down to some crossroads village of which he never had told Philip so much as the name.

Of course he asked many questions, and Oliver Aytoun liked nothing so well as to talk about the great world beyond the mountains and the cities and the ways of men. He was willing, once in a long time, to tell of his own early life. For nearly forty years he had lived here on Pillar Mountain, but before that he had come out of the East full of curiosity and love of adventure. But the strong taste of Western life had been too much for him. He had turned as wild as an Indian and on one unlucky day in a barroom at a mining camp he had killed his man. There was no law, really, to hound him, but Oliver Aytoun did not know that. He fled away into the mountains and reached this spot, and here he had remained.

At first he thought, as he struggled like a new Robinson Crusoe with the wilderness, that as soon as the memory of his crime had died out among men, he would go down among them again. But time made him love the mountains; he felt, too, like a poor flagellant, that there was some divine purpose, some divine punishment in this lonely life in which he found himself. He accepted the emptiness and the pain of it and hoped that he was being purged of sin. And every day, he told Philip, a remorseful time came to him during which he saw his victim lying with his head and shoulders hunched against the wall, young, and strong, and dead.

"I've got to be going," said Philip.

At this, the other turned his head, but he did not actually ask a question.

"Down, I mean," said the boy, and pointed towards the lights in the valley.

There was such a quality in his voice that Loafer got up and came to look in his master's face. However, the old man answered: "You'd better wait till you can lift the rock, my lad!" He added: "Or until you can budge it, at least; your father picked it out of the mouth of the spring, you know!"

Then he looked out not on the valley or the stars but on his own thoughts, seeing again the picture of the strong man. He had not spoken six times of Philip's father, but every mention of him was lodged in the boy's mind. First of all he had described how the man came, riding on a great black horse, with a two-year-old boy in the hollow of his arm. This big

man wore a beard and mustaches and his hair was prematurely gray; his age might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty-five. He was handsome, he had the true eagle eye, and his ways were quick, his manner a little imperious.

He spent that night at the shack, and the next morning, while they were eating breakfast, the child went outdoors and presently they heard its choked cry. When they ran out, they found that it had fallen down into the spring; they could see it far beneath arm's reach with face strangely not convulsed, looking up at them with great blue eyes.

The stranger seized the black rock which covered the spring and tore it up, then leaped into the bubbling well of water and brought up the child.

The water was as cold as ice; the little boy was weak with the shock and the fright of it; it was patent that he could not be carried forward that day, or perhaps the next. However, his father could not tarry, and promising to be back in the course of a week, he galloped away on his powerful black horse. Other men followed during several days, all asking if the rider of the black horse had gone that way, and all cursing and rushing away towards the valley trail when they heard the answer. It was plain that Philip's father was no law-abiding citizen, and Oliver Aytoun's opinion was that he had not returned for his child because of those same angry pursuers, who must have overtaken him and beaten him down by numbers, in spite of his gigantic strength. There was no way of learning the truth, because Aytoun never had learned

the name of his guest; he had given his own family name to Philip.

On those few occasions when Aytoun spoke of the boy's father, he did not try to make him out an ideal figure but frankly admitted that he seemed a rude, uneducated man; nevertheless the unknown had loomed gigantically in the mind of Philip Aytoun, and the great black rock which lay beside the bubbling of the spring had become a sacred symbol.

Once Aytoun had said, pointing to it: "You ought to be a good man, Philip. Your father paid down a heavy price for you!"

And if all the pounds of that mighty stone had been bright gold its value would not have been so great as it was now in the mind of the boy.

Always he had felt that he would need to be multiplied many, many times in order to make such a piece of a man as his father had been before him; and still beyond the words of Aytoun, he had the spectacle of the great black rock before him from day to day giving the giant of his imagination actual hands, at the least. Now with his own hands he had raised that stone, no doubt with more pain than yonder rider of the black horse, no doubt with a greater weakness thereafter, but the miracle had been accomplished. If he had been a trifle more religious, he would have felt that God was in his act.

"D'you think," said Philip, "that a man who can handle the rock is strong enough to get along in the world?"

"I think so," said Aytoun.

"I picked up the rock today," said Philip.

Aytoun hurried to the spring. There was just enough starlight for Philip to mark the manner in which the old man remained half bent and still beside the squat shadow of the rock; just beyond him the spring was bubbling, so that old Aytoun seemed to be standing in the rising and falling glimmer of the water.

He came back after a time.

"I hope you will be a good man in the world," said Aytoun.

Philip stood up beside the door.

"I am going to work very hard," said he. "As soon as I have made some money, I'll come back here for you, Uncle Oliver."

To this the old man did not make a reply. Philip waited a long moment, the brightness of joy fading from his face by degrees, for he felt that already something had stepped between them after these many years.

Loafer suddenly began to whine. Because Philip felt great pain in his own heart, he leaned and patted the great head of the dog and spoke very gently to it. He no longer looked down at the lights, but he wished that the morning would come quickly and that he were away, with the sense of guilt left behind him.

He went to bed, and lay with closed eyes, breathing deeply and regularly as though in sleep; for he was afraid that Uncle Oliver might begin to talk to him.

CHAPTER III

THEY were up with the dawn, both of them exceedingly cheerful, for cold air makes the blood dance; and though this was the golden time of the autumn, on that high mountain-shoulder the nights and the mornings were very sharp.

But when they sat down at the table, the constraint fell upon Philip again, so that he ate busily, made a good deal of noise with his fork and knife, patted Loafer, looked out the door, spoke about the mist which was rolling in thin silver up the mountainside with the aspens standing in it like streaks of tarnished gold. Nevertheless, the more he busied himself and the more carelessly self-conscious he tried to appear, the more keenly was he aware of the thoughtful face of Oliver Aytoun.

At last he could stand it no longer; he pushed back his stool and cried out: "But, Uncle Oliver, I am coming back!"

The old man nodded and smiled; his eyes were looking into distance as though he had heard words read aloud out of a story-book.

"You'll want this rifle," he said at last, "and you'd better take this revolver."

"They are your two best guns," exclaimed Philip.

"*Our* two best guns," answered Uncle Oliver.

Philip began to choke. He gathered up the dishes rapidly and began to wash them, scowling so that the tears in his eyes might not be seen. He felt so weak and uncertain that he could not believe that with these same hands he had lifted the black rock the day before.

Aytoun went about the preparation of a pack. He put into it some socks and shirts and flannel underwear and a bit of food. He spent some time examining the cartridge belts, but at last he selected one, and he had everything ready by the time the dishes were finished, and the dishcloth had been spread out neatly to dry.

At length Aytoun said: "If you ever should have a quarrel, I hope that you won't use a gun, Philip."

"No, no," said Philip, "I won't quarrel, because everyone down there is sure to know a great deal more than I do."

"Perhaps they will," said Oliver Aytoun, and closed his eyes.

"Not that you haven't taught me a lot!" exclaimed Philip. "Dear Uncle Oliver, I shall remember every day of my life—"

"Hush," said the old man. "I wish that I had a horse for you; but a mule will get you along."

"Take one of your mules? I wouldn't dream of it!"

"You must take one."

Philip looked wildly about him. For many years all his dreams had walked down into the valley towards the sparkling lights and he had told himself that they lived a small, poor life here on the mountain, but

never had he seen the truth so clearly as on this morning. It was a hovel that they lived in, and like beggars they had carved their existence in the wilderness from the hand of nature. But somehow his eye fastened and held upon the dishrag, because it made him think of fiercely cold winter evenings when the dishwater turned cold and greasy almost at once, and the tins rarely were really clean; one's fingers would slip a bit upon them.

"I'll take nothing more from you," said Philip huskily.

There was no further argument. He stood at last outside the hut, with the pack strapped behind his big shoulders; the rifle he carried slung loosely in his hand; the revolver was worn on his right thigh. His clothes were tough woolens which fade with time, but which rather stiffen than wear thin. The cartridge belt sagged heavily about his hips and yet he scarcely felt its weight for every day he had strode across the difficult mountain heights until the metal of his body was like the supple steel of sword blades.

The mist had made the rocks and the soil black; from a pine tree near the house there was a constant dripping, like the sound of rain.

"I'd better be getting on," said Philip.

"You'd better be getting on," said the old man.

"There's Loafer showing you the way!"

In fact, Loafer was scouting down the mountainside, as though he knew in what direction his master would be walking.

"Good-by, Philip," said Aytoun.

Philip took his hand.

"But I'm coming back!" said Philip desperately.

The other nodded.

"When you come to the town, get some cotton underwear," he said. "It'll be a lot warmer, down there in the valley."

Philip marched stiffly away. Loafer, once sure that the journey was to be in that direction, disappeared into the distance. At the edge of a scattering of lodge-pole pines, Philip paused. He wanted to look back, but somehow he dared not risk another glance at the shack, and therefore he stumbled ahead. Aytoun had taught him three prayers; one of these he began to murmur to himself, hardly knowing what he said, but the words made it easier to breathe, and when he came out on the far side of the lodge-pole forest his mind was clear enough for him to see what lay about him.

The mist was much thinner, except in hollows here and there where the sun fell upon it and made it as blinding white as snow, but the golden aspens sparkled everywhere through the veil and the ground could be seen, tanned with withered grass except where the rocks broke through. Taking note of all this, Philip was oddly comforted, and he walked on at a greater pace.

He entered the belt of spruce and big pines where the air was wonderfully sweet and the cold of the night remained. Loafer came back to him, panting, his red-shot eyes gleaming with lust for game, but now for a time he kept just ahead of his master, glancing back over his shoulder, once in a while, as though to

read the mind of the boy, and then trotting on. It was very easy for Loafer to change his home, thought Philip. One meal in three days was all he needed to have, and his sharp white teeth were sure to earn food at least that often; but he, a man, with a man's weakness, needed far more.

Once he came to a stop, resolved to go home and say to Aytoun: "I'm not very old; I don't know a great deal; I'll stay with you a while longer, if I may!" But then he thought of the white, fierce winter when the winds come leaping out of the north and he went on again.

By noon he had come, after steady traveling, to easier country. The forest was taller than ever, but it was open, rarely choked with underbrush, and often it gave way to broad clearings where the tanned grass rolled pleasantly and smoothly over the hills.

In one of these clearings he heard the sweet, far-off tinkling of a bell that walked gradually towards him. Philip halted, full of wonder, but at last it was only a brindled cow that walked over the hill with a brown bell tied around her throat. She stopped and looked at him, but then passed on unafraid and drank from the stream that went down the valley.

Philip sat down near the same spot to eat a lunch. He found that his food supply consisted of slices of cold bacon, fried crisp and placed between thick bits of cornpone, and it seemed to him that there never had been food so delicious as this and nothing so good to drink as the bright water that swerved past his feet.

Loafer lay down to watch with his red eyes for

crumbs. Bits that were thrown to him he slashed out of the air with his white fangs, capable of cutting through the flank of an elk to the life in a single stroke. However, he would need better and more food than this. A rabbit raised its foolish head from a tuft of grass a hundred yards away; Philip sent a bullet from his Winchester through that head, and Loafer was off at a gallop to bring in the prize. He brought it back and laid it at the feet of the master. It was a big, fat jack. With terrible desire, the jaws of Loafer slavered, and his belly muscles worked; so Philip gave it to him with a gesture and in an instant the rabbit was gone and Loafer curiously sniffing the bloodstains on the earth.

Philip studied him as he often had studied the dog before, for he saw in the greed and the cruelty and the hunger of Loafer a continual contrast with the goodness, the wisdom, the gentle grace of man, for whom this world and all the mountains and rivers and forests and beasts have been made. All has been prepared for him as by a kind father for a child; for so Oliver Aytoun had said, almost in those words. And Philip, looking up from the big wolfish dog to the hills, to the forest, to the sky, felt his heart run over with wonder and shame and gratitude. He felt that he was a weak and foolish creature, indeed; he prayed that he might become wiser, stronger, better, so that men would be willing to accept him as a brother!

After this, he set about reloading the rifle—for he wished to keep the magazine full; and the first thing

he discovered was that one of the pockets was empty and into it had been thrust a little roll of paper.

He took it out and spread in his hand thirteen dollars.

One by one he examined the frayed slips of paper, as though on each there were written some special message for him. It was all the money that Uncle Oliver possessed, and he sprang to his feet and faced the upward slope, determined to return to the shack and give back the money.

That purpose, however, did not endure, for he saw that it was more than money that Aytoun had given to him; if he gave back the money, he could not return the kindness and the love with which they were enveloped.

Such was mankind; wise, gentle, tender of heart!

He wrapped up the remainder of the provisions and was fitting them into the knapsack when he heard the sharp clicking of the hoofs of a horse, and he saw a rider come around the shoulder of a hill, close to the little creek.

This man was pushing with whip and red spurs a little exhausted mustang which acknowledged the spurs and the quirt with a sudden flattening of the ears, but with no increase of speed. Philip watched the cruel progress with amazement. But he decided that he would not judge too quickly, for the world was a most complicated place and the motives and the needs of man might be quite past his understanding.

Just as he had come to this thought, the stranger

marked him, and with an exclamation dropped the reins and jerked a rifle from the holster beneath his leg. Straight into the barrel of that rifle, Philip found himself gazing.

CHAPTER IV

THE rifle appeared to grow greatly in size as it came nearer; it presented a yawning black cavern to the gaze of Philip. Then, behind the gun he saw a man in a red flannel shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows over hairy forearms which were sunburned almost to blackness. He wore blue overalls, tightly belted at the waist. His open shirt exposed a black outcropping of thick hair on the neck and chest. His felt hat was worn slid back so far that both his cheeks and the tip of his nose had been fried to a bright red. He was fat, yet he appeared strong, active, and ready for work.

He said, as he drew closer: "Who in hell might you be?"

"I am Philip," said the boy.

"Philip what?"

"I don't know," said Philip. "I have no other name."

The man of the gun looked earnestly at the youth; then he gradually lowered his rifle.

"Got some chuck there?"

"Yes."

"Gimme," said he, and Philip gave the rest of his provisions.

The stranger stowed a whole section of corn bread

and bacon in his fat face and yet he was able to speak around it, though in a painfully choked voice.

"This ain't bad. Where you come from?"

"Yonder."

"That's Pillar Mountain. Nobody lives there."

Philip was silent. He felt that he was having an odd introduction to the world, but no doubt there was much kindness behind the strange manner of the horseman.

"You got a horse near-by?" asked the rider, stuffing another wedge of food into his mouth before it was half empty.

"No," said Philip.

The face of the stranger was so stretched with eating that he could show emotion only with his eyes, and these grew round with impatient anger. He tossed his head over his shoulder and glanced down the valley; then he stared back at the boy.

"What else you got around you?" he asked. "Lemme see that rifle. Butt first, mind you!"

Philip presented it duly, butt first. But he was greatly troubled, because he felt that the weapon was about to be taken from him if it were better than the stranger's own gun, and that it *was* better seemed patent to the first glance. So he presented his rifle, but he kept his hold on the barrel of it, and at the same time he caught the barrel of the rider's gun.

"Leave go, you poor fool!" said the other, with a snarl.

He wrenched mightily at the rifles; it was as though they were fixed in rock, and all at once he ceased his

struggle. His eyes grew round again, but not with anger.

"What's wrong with me havin' a look at your gun?" he asked. "I'm not gunna steal it! Leave go of mine, then, will you?"

"I don't know," said Philip. "I'm just thinking it over."

"I'll give you a hell of a quick start for your thinking, in another second," said the fat-faced man.

He shifted his hand from the butt of Philip's gun to the butt of a gun which thrust out of the saddle holster.

"Don't do that, please," suggested Philip. He poised his released gun as he spoke, so that it was like a club, held as light as a feather, and the other rolled his eyes up at the impending danger.

"Damnation!" he murmured under his breath, and he removed his hand from the revolver in his holster. "Call off your damn dog!" he added, his voice pitched several notes higher, in what was almost a squeak of fear.

Loafer had failed to understand a good deal of what was happening, but the brief struggle for the rifles was self-explanatory. He slipped around to the side of the stranger and a little to his rear, and then he crouched, waiting for no more than a whisper of command before he launched his great white fangs and a hundred odd pounds of muscle at the rider.

Philip drew back half a step and shifted the rifle in his hand so that the butt caught under his forearm, and his finger was on the trigger. In this fashion, it

was like a revolver, and it pointed at the breast of the other.

"I don't want to make any trouble," said Philip. "You're welcome to the food, if you're very hungry; but I think you wanted to take my gun, and you haven't any right to that."

"Me?" said the fat man, making a gesture of protest and rolling his glance to the heavens. "Me? A thief? God bless me, me boy, what sort of a gent d'you take me for?"

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure," said Philip.

"Me!" said the brown man, his excitement growing. "That have run cows on ten thousand acres, more or less. Me steal a gun! Well, son, I dunno how you was brung up!"

"I'm ashamed!" said Philip, growing a hotter crimson than before. "I really beg your pardon! If—if you'll sit down here and finish your lunch, I'll rub down your horse for you!"

"I dunno but what I will," said the brown man, and cast another glance down the valley.

Then he dismounted and sat on a rock, munching the food and keeping his rifle across his knees. Still, from time to time, he looked down the hollow, but he bent most of his attention on Philip. The latter in the meantime was hard at work over the mustang. He knew all about taking care of exhausted animals, for sometimes the work on the trails of Pillar Mountain wore the two mules to a shadow, and Aytoun had taught the boy what to do in such a case.

First he would have stripped off the saddle, but the stranger stopped him with a yell of protest.

"I might be wanting to start on, any minute," he declared. "You leave that saddle rest, will you?"

So Philip simply loosened the girths and pushed the saddle back. Then he fell to work, stripping the flabby muscles of the mustang with such an iron grip that the little animal squealed in protest. Nevertheless that enforced circulation soon made the flesh stand out firm and strong again, and the mustang soon was lifting his head and making active efforts to bite his tormentor. When he could not manage this, he merely dashed his heels at the empty air and then turned his attention to the nearest wisps of grass. Then Philip allowed him a single swallow of water and backed him off into a thicker stand of the dun-dried forage.

"He's better now, you see," explained Philip.

"If you dunno men, you know horses, kid," declared the fat man. "That's a trick that I can use on the trail—if I got the hands for it. Lemme see your hands, will you?"

Philip obediently offered them for inspection, and the stranger, like a connoisseur, bent back the long fingers and looked earnestly at the big tendons of the wrist.

"There's something to have," murmured the stranger, looking up from the inspection after a time. "There's something to have. There's something to wring necks with!"

He stood up and began to draw up the cinches of

the mustang. Over his shoulder, still looking down the valley, he said: "Thanks for the lunch. If you're ever stuck for a job, you come to me."

"Thank you," said Philip.

"You got no idea who I am?"

He was seated in the saddle, once more, smiling complacently down at the boy.

"No."

"If you had," said the fat man, "you'd be feelin' sick. But I tell you, I'm always easy on a tenderfoot. I'm always easy on a kid. You hear me."

"I do," said Philip, not quite understanding what was meant.

The stranger rode his horse into the stream.

"If you was to see anybody coming along after me," said he, "you might say that I'd sashayed over into the woods, there. You hear?"

"I do," said Philip.

The other waved a hand and then started to guide the mustang up through the rapidly flowing little stream, keeping to its bed until it turned out of sight within a few hundred feet. Philip put on his depleted knapsack. He worked slowly at the buckles of it for his mind was whirling; his first taste of humanity left him most ill at ease!

He had not walked on down the valley for five minutes when a little host of riders broke out of a wood and came storming down on him.

"You seen Joe Dorman up this way?" yelled one in the van.

"On a dead-beat pinto?" burst out a second.

Philip shrugged his shoulders. He was very ill at ease.

"I don't know what to say," said he.

A man more elderly than his companions, a hard-faced, keen-eyed man, came to the front.

"I'm the sheriff," he remarked, and turning down the lapel of his coat he revealed a silver-bright star of office. "Now I ask you—have you seen Joe Dorman?"

"I never heard that name," said Philip.

"You lie," said the sheriff coldly. "And you lie like a fool. Everybody knows Joe Dorman. You seen him—where? Where was he going?"

"I don't know," said Philip.

"You idiot!" shouted the sheriff. "You half-wit! Which way was he heading for?"

Philip remained silent. He knew that a sheriff stood very, very high, and his heart was in his throat, but for some reason it was impossible that he should betray the secret of Joe Dorman and his spent mustang.

"Will you talk?" yelled the irate sheriff.

"He's a half-wit, sheriff," said a kinder voice. "He don't know nothing."

"You ought to be able to read his mind if he's a half-wit," said the furious sheriff. "I tell you, he's blockin' the law. You take that fool in to town and lock him up in the jail. I'm gunna make him an example. You hear? A damn hot example is what I'm gunna make out of him!"

He gathered his men with a shout and they all pushed up the valley in a crash of hoof beats. But

when they struck a sharper slope just ahead, their horses slowed down to a staggering trot. Every one of them was terribly spent.

"They'll never get him," said Philip aloud.
"They're worse done than he!"

He was relieved.

CHAPTER V

WHEN he looked back from the disappearance of the posse, he found the quizzical eye of his guard fixed upon him.

"Well, kid," said he, "what you thinking of?"

"I was only wondering something," said the boy.

"I suppose Joe Dorman has done something wrong?"

"You suppose?" grinned the other. "I suppose so, too."

"What has he done, then?"

"What *is* there to do?" said the guard. "He's done everything there is. Gimme your guns, kid. I gotta walk you down to the town. Just hand 'em over right pronto," he added in a stern voice.

For the boy had hesitated a little; but then he remembered the caution which Oliver Aytoun had given him—there must be no trouble when guns were in hand—and how narrowly, perhaps, had he escaped a tragic quarrel with yonder hunted man only a few minutes before!

So he passed over his rifle and then his revolver. The guard looked upon them approvingly.

"You know how to keep a gun, kid," said he. "Who taught you?"

"My uncle," said Philip.

"Where you from?"

"That way yonder."

"But that'll be Pillar Mountain."

"Yes."

"And nobody lives on Pillar Mountain."

"Yes, I lived there."

"Who's your father?"

"I don't know."

The other frowned a little.

"I hope to find out, some day," said Philip cheerfully.

At this, he thought that he detected the ghost of a twisted smile on the face of the other.

"We better start along for town," said the rider not unkindly. "I better introduce myself. I'm Rivers. Mostly they call me Doc, which I ain't one, though. Come along, kid!"

They went on down the valley. Rivers was both curious and kind, which made rather a singular and uncomfortable combination.

"You been to school, ever?" said the gentle Doc Rivers.

"No."

Mr. Rivers whistled.

"That's a hell of a shame," he declared. "Wonderful what schooling does for you. It's mean work and it's slow work, but it helps a good deal. It brings you on. Amazin' what it would do for you, if you was able to read or write."

It came to the mind of Philip that he might undeceive his genial companion. Certainly he could read and write, and no doubt there had been some pain

involved in the learning, for he could remember the long evenings of labor when Oliver Aytoun sat as tutor and corrected the tasks.

And yet he was held back, because he felt that it might embarrass Rivers to know that his prisoner had been compelled to read certain hours of each long winter day.

"You talk pretty good, though," commented Rivers. "But then," he explained to himself, "a gent can pick up a lingo."

"I can read and write a little, too," said Philip.

"The hell you can," said the rider. He turned in his saddle and regarded his prisoner.

He went on: "You never heard of Joe Dorman?"

"No."

"I guess you never read newspapers, then?"

"I never have read a newspaper," said Philip.

The eyes of Doc Rivers expanded. He began to rub his chin.

"Think of that, now," he said, more to himself than to his companion. "Never read no newspaper. Got no education. And raised right here in the old United States!"

Presently he asked: "D'you ever have any trouble with your head?"

"What sort of trouble?" asked Philip.

"Sort of a pain when you try to think?"

Philip examined the question frankly and earnestly:

"Yes," he admitted, "I do."

Doc Rivers made a clucking sound. His sympathy was manifest.

"It's all right," said he. "It's all right, kid. We got places in this here state for taking care of folks like you. Don't you worry none. I'm gunna take a personal interest in pushing your case through. I know some folks—you wait and see! I'll land you plumb comfortable!"

He was so filled with his own thoughts that for some time, as they journeyed on, he nodded and murmured to himself.

"Now," he said at length, "what can you do for yourself?"

"I don't know," said Philip.

"You don't even know that!" said Rivers sadly. "Might I ask, can you ride a horse?"

"I never tried," said Philip.

"You never tried!" breathed Rivers.

"But I can ride a mule," offered Philip.

"You can ride a mule!" said Rivers, who seemed so overwhelmed that he could merely repeat the words he heard. "And can you stay on the back of a mule?" he asked with a gentle sarcasm.

Philip thought back to the painful days when the youngest of the two mules had been brought up by Aytoun. It was a wiry young gray devil with a small eye as bright as polished glass with a fire behind it, shining redly through. For a whole month he had struggled with the devilish wiles of that creature; a thousand aches and pains shot through him as he recalled the struggles.

"If it's a gentle mule I can ride it," he admitted.

Mr. Rivers grinned. But he banished the smile at once, as though ashamed of it.

"These here guns," he indicated the captured pair and added, "you'll get 'em back, all right, don't you worry. But these here guns, you was taught to clean 'em?"

"Yes," said Philip.

"Did you ever shoot a bullet out of one of 'em?"

"Yes," said Philip.

"Hit your mark?"

Philip thought of a jack rabbit, dodging like lightning among rocks.

"Sometimes I hit," said he.

"And sometimes you don't," grinned Rivers.

"Sometimes I don't," said Philip, and turned his big, frank eyes upon his companion.

"You never used a rope, none?" asked Rivers. "You don't know how to use a rope none?"

"Oh, yes," said Philip, "I can use a rope to tie a mule to a manger."

"You can use a rope—to tie a mule—to a manger," echoed Rivers, in the voice of one in pain. "Sweet—sufferin'—mama!"

Then he added: "Can't do nothin'—can't use a rope—can't ride a hoss—I dunno what's gunna become of you, kid! But the state'll take care of you," he said firmly and righteously. "Oh, yes, the state'll take care of you, or I'll make a scandal out of it. I'll put it in the papers!"

Philip considered; but he hardly knew how the state was to take care of him, or what being put in the

papers might mean. He felt, however, that he was face to face with some sort of a catastrophe.

"Can't even shoot!" said Rivers.

"But I can—a little," protested Philip.

"All right," said Doc Rivers. "Here's your own rifle, all nice and clean. There's a stump over yonder, nice and handy. I give you three shots at that!"

Philip accepted the rifle.

"I don't like to try," said he.

"Does it seem pretty far?" asked the kind Rivers.

"It's standing still, you see," explained Philip.

Mr. Rivers opened his eyes very wide. A light of real terror was in them as he croaked: "So it is; it's standing still. Mostly in your part of the world, does the trees run around a good deal?"

"What I mean to say," began Philip.

And then he broke off short, for a quail launched from beneath a bush near by and whirled down the valley with wings grown invisible with rapid motion.

At that, the rifle of Philip leaped to his shoulder. He followed the flight of the bird for half an instant with wavering muzzle, and then fired. The quail veered, a few feathers fluttered in the air, and it was gone into a clump of shrubbery.

"I'm very sorry," said Philip. "It rather surprised me. I mean—jumping up that way right at my feet!"

Doc Rivers hurried on with a preoccupied look, and leaned from his horse to examine the spot where the feathers had drifted to the ground.

"That's a hundred yards if it's a quarter of an inch," he observed to himself.

"I'm sorry," repeated Philip. "But often I hit them, you know!"

Doc Rivers merely responded: "Sweet—sufferin'—mama!"

His thoughts had drifted far off; suddenly he demanded harshly: "Gimme back that gun!"

Philip, hurt at the tone, returned the gun, and watched Rivers examine it with the greatest attention.

"There ain't nothing funny about it," said Doc Rivers. "It ain't nothing but a damned old Winchester. It ain't no different from my own gun."

He puckered his lips, as though his thought had left a sour thought in his mind. "I used to think that I could shoot a bit, myself," he observed.

"No doubt you can," said Philip, anxious to be pleasant. "No doubt you are really a great expert, Mr. Rivers. My Uncle always let me know that I had a great deal to learn."

"Who is your uncle? God?" asked Doc Rivers. "Maybe with a revolver you ain't very good, neither? Maybe you can only roll a small stone along the ground, or a tin can?"

"Yes," said Philip humbly. "That's about the hardest thing that I can do."

"You can do it, can you?"

"Yes."

"Here's your Colt. You got no trigger on it, I see. Does that mean that you fan it, kid?"

"Oh, yes," said Philip. "My uncle said that was the proper way to use a revolver. My uncle—"

"Oh, damn your uncle," said Doc Rivers. "Lemme see you roll that little ol' stone, will you?"

Philip looked askance at his companion. He felt that, although he did not wish to quarrel with any soul in this wide world, and though Doc Rivers had been the height of kindness up to this point, yet a slighting remark concerning the good, the wise, the kind, the gentle man who lived on Pillar Mountain was not to be tolerated.

However, he determined to do as he was bid and make no more disturbance about it.

The stone indicated was a rounded white pebble a couple of inches in diameter. He looked carefully at it, then he whipped the gun suddenly into play from the hip and the stone leaped wildly like a frantic living thing, striving to escape. Five shots made it leap five times, but the sixth shot missed the ground behind it.

"I'm sorry," said Philip, apologizing again. "But," he explained, "my uncle never was satisfied with the way I used a revolver. I haven't the patience to practice long enough; and ammunition costs such a great deal of money, you know!"

Doc Rivers, in silence, was dismounting from his horse. He picked up the small white stone, wrapped it in a spare bandanna, and placed it carefully in his pocket.

"Is it a rare specimen?" asked Philip politely.

"Is it a rare specimen?" echoed Rivers. "Sufferin'—sweet—mama—I'll tell a man it is!"

CHAPTER VI

PHILIP began to grow excited. The trail was joined by another; presently they were riding along a road which was rutted by wheels and which wound with a pleasant carelessness back and forth among the woods. He felt that they were bound to come upon men soon and his heart quickened with anticipation, for these other encounters hardly could be typical of what he was to expect of society. He had met, first of all, a fugitive criminal; and hot on the trail of that wicked man he had found a sheriff, fierce in the pursuit, and surrounded by savage man-hunters. As for Doc Rivers, he was pleasant and kind enough, but since the episode of the revolver and the little white stone, he had fallen strangely silent, only turning a quick and searching side-glance at his companion from time to time.

Now, before them, they heard the rapid sound of a horse trotting up the road, and presently a mustang came in view with its rider sitting sideways, his left knee hooked over the horn of the saddle. He gave a hunchbacked appearance in the distance, smoking a cigarette, his head bobbing up and down with the jar of the trot, but when he came nearer, saw them, and straightened, Philip made out a strongly built young man with a rather handsome, lazy face.

"Hello, Lew," said Rivers.

And: "Hello, Doc. Whacha doin' up here?"

"Been Dormanin'."

"Is he loose again?"

"Ain't you heard?"

"Nothin' lately."

"He got Bud Chalmers, at last."

"The hell you tell me."

"The hell I don't."

"Is this part of Dorman's gang?"

"Him? He ain't part of nobody but himself," Rivers explained Philip.

Lew appeared curious, but Rivers merely added: "I'd introduce you, but I ain't got time to write a book. Anyway, his name is Philip. This is Lew Thompson."

"Philip what?" asked Lew Thompson, shifting his cigarette across his mouth on the tip of his tongue.

"Philip nothin'," answered Doc.

"How do you do," said Philip out of a book. "I'm charmed to meet you, Mr. Thompson."

"Hello," said Thompson, the cigarette bobbing on his lips. "Where did you get it, Doc?"

"Loose up yonder."

"It ain't branded?" continued Thompson in the same curious, impersonal manner.

His attitude seemed to Philip rather rude; he did not like to be talked about as though he were a rock or a tree, but at the same time he understood so few of the remarks that he hardly knew how to take offense.

"He ain't branded," agreed Doc.

"And he's too young to be a maverick?"

"I guess you read him right, Buddie."

"Listen."

"I'm hearin'."

"You two come sashaying up to me shanty. Lil'll have a snack for you."

"I don't mind if I do," agreed Doc Rivers.

They turned back with the stranger.

"What happened to his hoss?" asked Thompson.

"He ain't never rode nothin' but a mule," asserted Doc Rivers, and he turned a blank eye upon Lew, and Lew turned a still blanker glance upon Philip. There was a taste of innuendo in the air, as it seemed to Philip, but he said nothing, and decided that he would certainly follow the advice of his uncle and never look for trouble until it stood bodily before his eyes.

From the main trail they branched on to a thin bridle path, so faintly worn that the horses were continually weaving to avoid brush or the stretched arms of trees.

"We're losin' a lot a time," said Doc Rivers.

"You hook on," said Thompson. "Maybe I'll need you."

"What for?"

"Lil is what for."

"You been out?"

"Kind of."

This conversation was astonishing to Philip. He guessed that it must be a species of shorthand, much significance being attached to short phrases, and he

was rather depressed when he thought how much time he must needs spend in mastering this vernacular before he could converse freely with his fellows.

Now they broke out of the deeper forest and went through an area of ugly stumps, and beyond this to cleared ground, in the center of which stood a small log cabin.

Philip now hung in mid-stride, because on the threshold of the hut, the interior of the cabin blank and dark behind her, sat a stalwart, handsome girl nursing a baby at her breast. She put the child away when she saw the three approaching and stood up.

Now Philip had seen the glory of storms in the wild country above timberline, and he knew the golden moment of the year when the first frost streaks the mountain forests with gold or crimson or purple or staring yellow, and he had lived among wild animals, and watched the rivers go mad and glorious after the thaw of May, but never had he seen a sight so beautiful as this first woman, and never had he seen anything that so filled him with awe. Out of his reading, phrases and lines of poetry leaped across his mind; he could have fallen upon his knees—beauty, motherhood combined!

"Look at the kid," chuckled Doc Rivers. "He's scared of Lil."

"That ain't so funny," remarked the husband.

Then he took off his hat and waved it.

"Hello, honey!" he called to her with a cheerful voice.

The brown beauty at the door of the cabin said

nothing! she merely looked steadfastly upon her spouse.

"Brought home ol' Doc Rivers," said Thompson gaily, "and I thought—"

Musical and brief the voice of the girl responded: "Where you been?"

"Me?" asked Thompson, with most gentle tone of surprise. "Where I been?"

"Lewis Thompson, where you been? What you been doin'? Who you been rampin' around with these two days? You been drinkin' whisky!"

"I ain't," said Lew Thompson, without conviction. "I ain't been doin' no such thing. Ain't you gunna be reasonable, Lil?"

"Lew Thompson, are you gunna come home lyin' and sneakin', you no-good, ornery, low-down varmint, you!"

"O God," moaned Lew Thompson to Rivers, "she's gunna open up. Doncha leave me, Doc. Oh, man, doncha leave me noways, will you?"

Philip rested a hand against the sweating shoulder of Doc's horse; he needed something to sustain him. For he had come to the verge of heaven, to the opening of the very gates of Paradise, and this was the discord to which he must listen!

Lew Thompson went up to the girl with one hand extended.

"I wanna tell you," he said, "about a business deal I been talkin' over that'll—"

"Don't you come up to me like I was a hoss," said the fierce girl. "I ain't gunna eat out of your hand."

Thompson thrust the offending hand into his pocket.

"Lil, for God's sake, doncha go disgracin' me in front of folks!"

"Is Doc Rivers folks?" said the terrible virago. "There ain't nobody this side of the Pass that's half so low-down and wuthless as him; but he's good enough for you to go spendin' your money on him, he is! I got enough of this. I don't have to stand it; I ain't gunna stand it!"

"We better go," said Doc Rivers to Philip.

He might have spoken to a stone and been heard more clearly. These dreadful words which he had just listened to withered the whole joy of existence from the mind of the boy. Paradise? No, it was the deeps of hell into which he peered, and saw it seething with red fire and crossed by jagged arms of smoke. He could not draw his frightened eyes away.

"I don't want nothin' but a coupla minutes quiet talk with you, Lil," said Thompson in persuasive manner. "I gotta scheme up my sleeve that oughta change everything for—"

"So've I," said the girl. "I got a change up my sleeve, too. It's a change of address. The only reason that I been waitin' this long for you to come back was to tell you what I thought about you, and let you know where to send my mail, you low skunk, you Lew Thompson."

"Aw, honey," said Thompson, and stepped desperately close.

That instant the hand of the girl which had been held behind her swept into view, bearing a stout

homemade broom. It looked more like a quarterstaff than a mere broom, and with this she cut fairly at the head of Lew Thompson. He raised an arm to protect himself, and yelled with pain as the arm took the blow.

"You she-devil!" shouted Thompson, and smote her on the root of the jaw.

Philip caught his breath, and blackness spun before his eyes. Somewhere he had read of it in books. There were wild and terrible romances which spoke of such things as men beating women. He looked forth again.

She was staggered, but not down. Broad, massive, clothed in hard muscle, it was a Homeric jaw upon which Thompson had struck, and it withstood the blow. She reeled, and crashed with an audible grunt against the wall of the cabin. Then, more horrible than all else, it was seen that Thompson was rushing in upon her, his fists clenched, his face fierce.

"I'm gunna give you a bringin' up and a draggin' down," cried Thompson. "I'm gunna be a pa and a ma to you, you chunk of female bronco, you—"

The distance was great, but the need was dreadful, and with one bound Philip crossed the intervening space. He caught Thompson's shoulder and drew him around.

"You mustn't," breathed Philip.

"Why, you damn young fool!" said Thompson, and raised his burly fist to strike a real blow.

He was forestalled. Hastily, with not half his force, Philip struck—as a bear might strike back-hand at a

cub. But like the crash of a bear's forepaw was the effect of that blow. The wind was jammed out of Thompson's body in one gasping, whistling rush and he fell on his side, one leg drawn up beneath him, one leg kicking violently as he struggled for breath and knocked himself about in a circle like a dying hen.

"Good heavens!" cried Philip. "I hope I haven't—"

A loud yell beat into his mind. He saw the girl coming at him like a tigress.

"I'll teach you, you murderer!" said she. "I'll break your head for you, you sneaking traitor, you—"

The blow missed the ear of Philip and crashed upon his shoulders, and the weight of it broke the stout staff of the broom as though it had been a straw. He did not wait for another, with the shortened truncheon of the staff. He merely fled, shouting to Loafer in time to stop the big dog as it flew at the throat of the girl.

On the edge of the trees, Philip looked back and saw the young mother on her knees beside her winded husband, calling pitifully to him to open his eyes, and assuring him that she loved him more than diamonds or mountains of gold.

Philip went slowly on, rubbing the bitter pain in his shoulder. And as he walked, he blinked at the dreadful images which had been thrust before him in the last few moments.

Behind him came a sound of loud laughter, and there was Doc Rivers, reeling in his saddle with his mirth. Loafer followed last of all, casting keen glances over his shoulder, as though he longed to be back in the fray.

CHAPTER VII

"You gotta take time," said Rivers. "You can't learn in a minute! That was a fine swat that Lew got in on her, wasn't it?"

His eyes shone with pleasure and admiration, but Philip looked on his companion as on a madman.

"A little nearer to the point," argued Doc Rivers, "and he'd have put her down; and a happy day for poor Lew if he'd done it. She's a tiger. Doggone me if she ain't a tiger! I says, the day that Lew married her: 'There goes a hero!' says I. She heard me say it, too, and I get a cold sweat when I think of what she'll do to me some day. I'd rather play with a forest fire than fool with her. Say, where did you learn to box?"

"Box?" said Philip gently.

"Yes, box," replied the admiring Doc. "We used to think that Thompson could fight a little until a wild Canuck came down here like a twelve-mule team and run over him. But that wasn't nothing like this. Spaff! I never seen such a punch! A left shift to the wind, it looked like to me. Lew will have to wear a mustard plaster for a month to draw his insides back to their right locations. He'll need to get all resurveyed. I thought I seen your fist come out through his back. How much do you weigh, kid?"

"I don't know," said Philip, who understood only one word in every three from this speech. "I never was weighed."

"You never was what? Well, you got the makings of something. I ain't gunna take you to the jail. I'm gunna set you up and manage you. A good heavy-weight gets something for his trouble."

Philip paused as they reached the main trail; and Loafer, who had reached his side, paused also, and looked up into his master's face.

"I wasn't dreaming it?" suggested Philip rather wistfully. "He actually struck her?"

"He actually didn't do nothin' but," chuckled Rivers. "It was his good ol' right, too! You know women?"

"I?" murmured Philip.

He closed his eyes for an instant, and far away he saw a bright procession of fairy forms, and gentle ladies on milk-white palfreys, and lovely Una with her hand upon the lion's head.

"No," said Philip, "I don't suppose I do — actually—"

"They take practice," declared Doc Rivers, "but always you gotta come over them with a high hand. My old man was always in hell. Outside, he was as tough as they come. He had hide as tough as the skin of a rhinoceros. You could of busted a Bowie knife on my old man's hide. But when he come home, he wanted to rest and take it easy. He was always talkin' about his aches and pains and waitin' for some sympathy. Well, I seen him wait for twenty-five

years, and he never got none. I never seen him get but one smile out of the old woman, and that was when he was stretched out inside of boards. Then she sat down and folded her hands: 'He's been a hard job, but he's finished at last,' says she. That's woman, kid!"

"I don't understand," said Philip.

"Ain't I talkin' the language?"

"Have you been talking about your own father—and—your own mother?"

Doc Rivers turned a little in the saddle and looked down on the boy.

"I sort of get your drift," he said. "You're kind of Sunday School. That's the spoilin' of you! Women," said Doc Rivers, "is lightning on skates. Women is steel cases with a lead core. Women is a long trail with a blizzard blowin'."

He fell into gloomy thought which continued for a long time. "Back East they got a new invention," said Rivers at last. "It would be a help to you."

"Yes?" queried the boy politely.

"They got wagons with gas engines in 'em that run without hosses. Automobiles they call 'em. You could use one; otherwise, you're gunna be walkin' through a pile of mud before you're much older!"

The road was so dry that the dust was blowing, and therefore Philip saw no meaning whatever in this remark, and a moment later he had another thing to take his attention, for the trail, which recently had grown deeper and more worn, now joined another road which had still more the aspect of a main

thoroughfare and where the two intersected there was a shambling, sunburned group of buildings. A long watertrough in four big sections, green-dripping along the sides, the surface of the water freckled with dust, stood before the largest of the structures.

"There's Miller's place," said Rivers. "I guess we can afford to pull up and likker there, kid. What you think?"

They dismounted in front of Miller's, therefore. Certainly it did not resemble a palace out of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, but it was far the most imposing work of man that the boy had as yet seen, and he paused a moment in the white-hot dust of the street to regard the shambling façade with reverence, thinking how many backs must have been bent to raise this monster, how many handstrokes must have been used to fasten the timbers. No wonder the paint was burned and peeled from most of it. A veritable ocean of color and oil would have been needed to re-do the surface.

"Come along, kid," said his companion. "I'm getting so dry that I'm kind of blind. You might have to lead me by the hand, unless I can smell my way to the boozel!"

The floor of the veranda creaked loudly beneath their boots. Then they pushed through a swinging door and Philip found himself in a long, low, narrow room where already half a dozen men were leaning at a high wooden counter, turning glasses between thumbs and forefingers.

It would have been possible, indeed, to locate that

room because of its fragrance, which was partly that of many fuming Bull Durham cigarettes and a sharp, sour scent of beer, and a pungency of stronger liquors, though none of those perfumes could have been identified by Philip. However, he liked the dim coolness, and the strands of wet sawdust sprinkled on the floor, and the comfortable chairs that lined the wall. Outside the sun was raging; the burn was still between his shoulder blades. But this was a moist, misty Paradise of coolness.

Truly, wonderful were the ways of man, and good and beautiful was this shining world of man's devices!

The six dusty forms before the bar turned slowly towards them with a general, throaty: "How-d'ye." Behind the wooden counter a tall, sad-faced man leaned towards them, notable for a jacket which once had been white but now was streaked with stains of varying shades of amber and of brown, sometimes edged with black dust.

"Well, boys?" said he in a mournful voice.

"Red-eye—and a double one," said the eager Rivers.

"What you drinking, kid?"

"Milk, if you please," said Philip.

Then he was aware of a dreadful silence which walked through the room, casting cold on either hand.

CHAPTER VIII

PHILIP looked to his companion for an explanation, but Doc Rivers was clutching the bar tightly with both hands. A tremor, or what seemed a tremor, shuddered through him. Beyond him appeared half a dozen blank faces of men who were slowly craning back or forward in order to have a clear view of the last speaker. As for the bartender, a light of terror and wonder appeared in his eyes, and he was the first to break the silence with a hoarse voice.

"Milk," said the bartender.

"Sufferin'—sweet—mama!" said Doc Rivers.

A deep and sympathetic voice added, from farther down the bar, "It's these here damn cooped-up autumn days. They burn the heart out of you. They burn the head out of you. You better lay the kid out and wrap up his head in wet towels. He's gunna be took right bad in a few minutes."

"I'm very sorry," said Philip. "If you haven't any milk, a glass of water will do very well for me, thank you."

Another silence followed, but it was shorter. The bartender slowly and carefully moistened his white lips.

"My God," said he, "this here is a bad case. Bill, you've done some doctoring in your day, ain't you?"

"Hold on!" cried Doc Rivers, as though returning to himself. "Hold on, boys. Lemme ask the kid a few questions. Son, have you ever tasted beer?"

"No," said Philip, "I haven't."

Doc Rivers waited for this important information to be heard upon all hands, in the meantime turning a triumphant eye about the barroom and challenging every face.

Then he added: "I ask you a simple question, kid. You try to recollect. Did you ever see a glass of whisky?"

He underlined these words with little pauses before and after every one. But Philip answered at once: "Oh, no. But my uncle once had a glass of whisky."

Even Doc Rivers, who seemed braced and prepared for some such reply, who had led on the others towards the shock of it, seemed fairly unstrung, and as for the rest, they simply were staggered. One man, heavy of body and red and round of face, sank into a chair with a crash and remained there. The others wandered slowly in the direction of Philip and came to a focus upon him.

"Is it real?" said one slender and sun-dried man. "It ain't a dream, boys," he added in rather pathetic tones. "It ain't something that you're puttin' over on me?"

He reached out and touched Philip's shoulder with the tip of a forefinger, and then he started back a little, almost as though he had been burned. Loafer began to rumble a danger signal, and the crowd scattered a little.

"You better fork over that glass of water," said Doc Rivers, and when it was presented to Philip and the latter had drunk it, he added: "You might go out onto the veranda and rest yourself a minute. I won't be long."

To the veranda Philip went. He would have preferred to remain among these strangely silent men in the cool of the barroom, but he felt that the suggestion was more or less of a command. So he went out on to the veranda, shadowed, to be sure, but drenched with the heat which was reflected from the street. Before the watering trough, one hip sagging, and mouth still adrip, Doc Rivers' mustang was submitting to the flare of the sun, just as the other horses of earlier arrivals were doing, here and there.

Sadness fell steeply, like midnight at midday, upon the soul of Philip, for he felt now that between him and others of his race there existed great voids and gulfs of difference which he might spend half a lifetime attempting to cross and yet never arrive at the goal. Behind beer and whisky there lay, apparently, some important mystery. He would attempt to learn what it was, in due time.

A pleasant breeze was rising, and fanning against the swinging doors of the barroom, it kicked them open a trifle and allowed flashes of conversation to float out to him.

"He could hit the white of your eye at a thousand yards, that's all that he could do."

"Come off the mountain with a damn wolf that he called a dog."

"Never knew nothin', never seen nothin', never heard nothin'. He was raised in a glass case!"

He felt, with no real assurance, that some of these remarks, at least, were intended for him, for it was always the voice of Doc Rivers, and then he heard a burst of loud laughter, a stamping of feet, and Rivers protesting in shrill tones.

The swinging doors were thrust open.

"Kid, you come on in!" commanded someone.

Philip rose and faced a burly man with a neck as knotted with strength as the trunk of a tree. Two small, overbright eyes, now sparkled at him, now were lost in gloom, as the heavy brows of the stranger twitched up and down.

"You come on in. I'm gunna teach you some tricks!" laughed the stranger.

Philip passed through the doorway, obediently. He hardly liked the appearance of this man, and certainly he did not like an ugly quality which lurked behind his voice.

"Me an' Archie, we're gunna take you in hand," said the other. "What in hell could a dried-up runt like Doc Rivers do for you? Me an' Archie, we'll make you a regular college graduate, in no damn time whatever. I'm Chisholm. I'm Bert, and there's Archie. Maybe you've heard of us?"

He leered, and Philip blinked once or twice to clear his eyes, to clear his mind.

"I really haven't," said he.

Someone in the barroom chuckled, and Bert Chisholm swerved with a roar of anger.

"Who started a horselaugh?" he asked fiercely.

All at once, there was silence. Doc Rivers was pale and stiff, gripping his glass hard. The tall bartender had begun to bite his lips anxiously.

"Here's your place," said Bert Chisholm. "Right over here in the middle."

He took the arm of Philip with a mighty hand and placed him in the center of the bar.

"Here's Archie on one side of you. Here's me on the other. I guess you ain't got pretty good company, eh?"

He leered at Philip again.

"I'm a man-maker, or I'm a man-breaker," said Bert Chisholm. "Ain't I, Archie?"

"I don't appear to see nobody that says you ain't," said Archie. "But maybe I ain't hearing good, today. I thought I heard somebody laugh, a minute ago, and I been waitin' for the coyote to howl agin!"

Philip looked anxiously to Doc Rivers for a clue as to what he should do, or what was expected of him, but Rivers had a face of stone.

"Now," said Bert, "you see this here glass? This is whisky, kid. And you're gunna drink it."

"Certainly," said Philip meekly, and took the glass.

He was certain that scorn and derision appeared on the face of both the giants who surrounded him. However, he took the glass and tasted it. He set it down and coughed. Fire had been introduced to his throat.

"I can't drink it," choked Philip. "I don't like it, you know."

"He don't like it," said Archie Chisholm.

"He don't like it!" repeated Bert. "He don't like it. It ain't milk, is it?"

"No," said Philip. "It's not milk."

"But when I say it's milk, it *is* milk."

"I don't understand you," said Philip. "I'm sorry, sir."

"He's sorry, sir," said Archie, and began to laugh in a vast flood of noise.

"He calls me 'sir', now. He's gunna call me God A'mighty, in another minute," said Bert Chisholm.

"And this was your idea of a dangerous man, was it? This was your idea of a fightin' man, Rivers?"

Rivers, attempting to speak, made only a faint bubbling sound; and his face was a dreadful thing to see, so splotched was it with white and with purple.

"Drink it up—drink it down!" bellowed Archie. "He shoots out the whites of a gent's eyes, does he? I'm gunna see. I think he's a yaller dog!"

Philip sighed. He felt rather sick and cold. And then he raised the unwelcome glass of fire again.

"Stop it, and put it down," barked Doc Rivers.

He obeyed with a start.

Then, after a terrible hush, two burly heads turned towards Rivers.

"It ain't possible that I heard somebody speak?" suggested Bert Chisholm. "It wasn't a skinny fool by name of Rivers, was it?"

"If there ain't any shame in the kid, there's shame in me," said Rivers. "I'll die before I see you make him take water!"

"Whisky, son. Whisky—not water. But maybe water, too. You're gunna stop us, are you?"

"I'm gunna do my best," said Rivers.

He was trembling violently, his back to the bar. His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed with difficulty.

"You—hell!" said Bert Chisholm, and his big hand shot forth.

It was only his left hand, but it was enough. It grazed the head of Rivers and shot him sidelong to the floor. At the same instant the other bystanders leaped for the wall, and Philip saw Bert standing over Rivers, a gun naked in his hand.

"You pull that gun," screamed Chisholm, "and I'm gunna kill you as sure as God made little apples. I'm gunna drill you. I'm gunna blow you to hell!"

Doc Rivers, blood on his face, lay still; he no longer fumbled at the gun which was belted at his hip, but he raised one hand and covered his eyes as if to shut out some dreadful sight, and Philip could guess that the terrible picture had something to do with himself.

"Now," said Archie Chisholm, "we're gunna get back to that little drink of whisky, brother?"

CHAPTER IX

YOUNG Philip, the drink raised in his hand, paused and looked at it—paused as on a mountaintop and looked at life and at himself. He did not need more experience of men and their ways to teach him that he would despise himself and be despised by others if he submitted to this bullying treatment; more particularly after Rivers had volunteered to at least step into the breach for a moment.

And what was he to Rivers?

He thought, on the other hand, of Pillar Mountain; and it chanced that looking through the dusty window he could see one lofty shoulder of it raised against the sky, so that Uncle Oliver Aytoun and his words came strongly home in his mind. He was to have no trouble with men with guns. And this was his very first day in the world as others lived in it!

Bert Chisholm was saying, with a sneer in his rumbling voice, "Now doggone me if it ain't just like out of a book. Here's the tenderfoot at the bar, and here's a couple of mean, rough cowpunchers invitin' him to take his drink, and aimin' to wring his neck if he don't. Now, how does it usually end up in the story-books, boys?"

"We get our jaws bashed in," grinned the other brother, "or else the tenderfoot, he's a killer in dis-

guise, and he punctures the two of us without hardly looking—one in front and one behind him. That's the way in the fool stories."

"So it is," assented Bert. "Now, kid, are you out o' a book? Or are you off of Pillar Mountain?"

Philip looked about him. If there had been any help, he would have asked for it, shamelessly. But there was no help. The others in the room, as appeared by their disgusted faces, did not like this proceeding, but they were not prepared to stand up in behalf of a stranger. The only appeal could be to the two Chisholms themselves!

But when he looked at them a peculiar darkness lurched across the eyes of Philip, such as never had obscured his mind before, and with that darkness there was a burning of his blood and a fierce heat which, all in an instant, ran like quicksilver from his heart to his brain, and back again, and all his body began to tingle.

"I don't want to make trouble," said Philip, in a husky, almost breathless voice.

"He don't want to make trouble!" mocked Bert. "You ain't gunna make no trouble, kid. Don't you go thinking that you will!"

"Bear up a little," said Archie. "Look at him shakel!"

"I suppose that I ought to fight," suggested Philip, in the same voice, so unfamiliar to his own ears.

"I suppose that you had ought to," answered the sneering Bert.

He waited another moment, and then added.

"I'll give you while I count ten—and I'll count to myself!"

It had become impossible for Philip to think. He strove desperately, as though the ghost of Oliver Aytoun had been standing before him, but no words came to his lips. That odd dimness was gone and in its place he saw everything with a tremendous brightness, as though intolerable lights had been focused on every face. Thousands of details thrust into his mind quite against his volition. He observed senselessly that Bert wore a check shirt, and that it was rubbed and soiled with grease in the hollow of the right shoulder. There was a small wart in the cleft of Bert's chin, and from the wart grew a long hair, which curled twice round. But Archie was different; he was a comparatively tidy fellow, and in this crisis, as though to defend the brutal attitude of his brother, in which he himself was supporting Bert, he blurted out: "You fix yourself up as one of Joe Dorman's hired men, and what in hell d'you expect from us, kid?"

It seemed to Philip that the count of ten had been vastly prolonged.

Then it was over; the eyebrows of Bert Chisholm rose and made his eyes like the little, red-stained, round, fierce eyes of a boar. At the same instant, accepting the signal, Archie Chisholm knocked Philip down.

There are men who say, and they are men wise in the West, that it was the manner of his fall that made the story of Philip's other days worth writing about.

If he had been hurled straight down to the floor, perhaps he would have lain there. Yonder was an example, for instance—Doc Rivers sitting bunched on his heels, but not quite daring to rise in face of the desperadoes. But it chanced that the mighty blow of Archie Chisholm launched the boy full into the chest of his brother.

With arms outflung to break his fall, Philip pitched forward, and as he struck Bert, he clasped him to his breast and turned, presenting the body of Bert to Archie's gun.

That gun remained hovering in the air, like a bird, uncertain where it shall land upon the solid earth, and in the face of Archie was blank bewilderment. For he knew his brother as a twin should, and since his earliest days of memory he had regarded Bert more as an explosive than as a fighting man—more as a rending, roaring, irresistible charge of powder than as so much mere human bone and muscle—but now he saw Bert's arms crushed helplessly against his sides. The back of his neck in that instant had turned fiery red and begun to bulge, and his head toppled back with the long, horrible gasp of a breathless man.

"You—" said Philip—" I beg you to leave this room, or I'll kill you. I want to kill you. I'll give you till I count ten to leave this room—and I'll count to myself!"

With his left hand he took Bert Chisholm by the throat and held up those two hundred pounds with that one hand as a shield, and Bert hung limp, motionless, with his dreadful face hanging back and to one

side. With his right hand, Philip drew Bert's nearest revolver and held it at his hip. It had a familiar feel. There was neither trigger nor sight, and the hammer worked softly under the pressure of his thumb.

Archie hesitated. All the days of his life Bert had done his thinking for him. Bert was an invincible and terrible God. But the God was now a helpless, hanging weight, senseless, speechless, with horrible sounds gurgling in his throat.

"I dunno what—" began Archie.

Then, having hesitated, he was lost. He began to back up towards the door. He flashed a glance towards the others in the room, and if he had read in one eye contempt or disgust he would have fought the thing out to the death, then and there, even if he had to drive his bullets first through the body of his brother. But not a glance met his. On the contrary, there was only one point of interest, and agape, with bulging eyes, the bartender and the rest of his patrons stared at it.

So Archie, lacking the necessary spur which would have kept him from shame forever, took another stride back and was through the swinging door. Then Philip cast his throttled man upon the floor. Heavily fell Bert Chisholm, as weighty as some Homeric hero in armor of bronze, and the boards crashed beneath him and a cloud of dust went up like a great puff of smoke from the lips of a smoker.

The intolerable brightness left the brain of Philip and in place of the fire that was in him cool streams of weakness trickled back through brain and body.

"I didn't want to," said Philip aloud. "I didn't want to—and—and I didn't use a gun—"

He hurled the weapon which he had taken from Bert Chisholm through the window, smashing the glass to a thousand bits, and letting the picture of Pillar Mountain stand undimmed before his eyes. Then he dropped his elbows on the bar and his face in his hands.

People were murmuring and whispering, like voices in a sick-room, and at last a bubbling, gasping cry broke on the ears of Philip. A hand struck his shoulder; the voice of Doc Rivers said harshly: "Get out of this with me!"

And he followed his companion through the swinging doors.

There stood Archie Chisholm, his face still blank, the revolver hanging from his hand, exactly as he had stood there from the moment that he left the bar-room. He did not appear to see them as they went past, but he lurched forward through the doors.

"Run for it!" cried Rivers softly, and throwing himself into the saddle, he offered a stirrup leather to Philip.

"I don't think I'll run," answered Philip.

He walked quietly down the middle of the road. Twice he turned and looked back.

And twice his throat seemed drier than the dust of the street with a thirst that could be satisfied yonder in the saloon where there were many men, and two, at least, men ready for a fight.

Yet each time he forced himself to swing away, for

the doors of the saloon did not yawn open, and there was no spectacle of men mounting swiftly for pursuit.

Rivers kept at his side, twitching and turning nervously, apparently very eager to be gone at a full gallop, but the same sense of loyalty which had bound him to Philip in the barroom bound him still and kept him back with the boy.

Now the road turned, and when the rest of the town was shut behind an elbow curve, and when the evergreens threw the sweetness of their breath in his face, Philip was able to breathe more easily. When he came under the shadow of the first grove, he asked permission to rest a while, and Rivers without a word drew rein.

There, elbow on knee, knuckles grinding into his chin, Philip tried to work out this thing which had happened to him, but made little headway. The more he tried to clear the matter up, the more cloudy it became and he was only sure of one thing—that when the crisis came yonder in the barroom his own soul had made way in his body for the spirit of another. That had been his first instant of life; before that he was a dim, unborn thing; no light ever had entered his eyes until the white-hot flood had poured out from him upon the world. There had been no joy for him, either. To follow a trail to an ending, to look at the stern beauty of the mountains in winter or the gold of the autumn, to listen to the gentle voice of Oliver Aytoun, to fall into happy dreams—nothing was more than a phantasm compared to that blinding ecstasy which had fallen upon him.

He told himself that he thanked God his hand had been held, but no matter what words and judgments he thrust into his mind, he knew that his heart was wild with a new hunger which had not been satisfied that day and which never would leave him until it had been fed!

CHAPTER X

A PINECONE dropped past his ear. Above him he heard the shrill barking of an angry squirrel, and he looked up but only saw the brown branches, the host of gray-green needles, and a deep immensity of sky beyond. His humor softened.

"What have I done?" he said to Rivers.

"All you done was to choke Bert Chisholm and make his brother Archie take water," said Rivers. "Neither of them things is possible. That's all you done in the last section of your day."

"Why do I have such trouble?" asked Philip sadly. "Wherever I meet men I want to be friendly. I want to learn from them. I want to be kind and good. But they fight with me immediately. They steal my food; they beat me, even the women; they threaten me with drinks that choke my throat; they take my guns away—"

Rivers started violently.

"Guns?" he said. "I forgot, damn if I didn't. Here you are, kid. I don't hanker after these guns. I don't want 'em. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't have 'em. Here you are, kid. You take back your guns, will you?"

He fairly thrust them into Philip's hands, so that the latter was forced to receive them, as it were; but he held them back towards his guard.

"I can't take them," he said. "Because they've been confiscated by the law. The sheriff wouldn't like to have you give them back to me until I've been cleared—"

"Oh, damn the sheriff!" said the other.

Philip glanced over his shoulder; he was frightened.

"But the sheriff is the law!" he exclaimed.

"He's the little finger of it and the thumb too, around these parts," admitted Doc Rivers. "All the same, I tell you that the sheriff don't want your guns."

"How can you tell?" asked the guileless Philip.

"How can I tell? I can guess—just!" murmured Doc Rivers. He began to massage with his finger tips the large lumps where the iron knuckles of Chisholm had struck the side of his head. "I can guess that he don't want your guns. Like me, he wouldn't have 'em for a gift."

"I don't understand," said Philip.

"You don't have to," said Rivers earnestly. "There's only one thing important for you to understand right now—and I'll tell you what it is: You understand that I'm your friend. You got that buttoned inside of your head?"

Philip was so roused by this speech that he rose from the bank on which he had been sitting and laid his hand on the shoulder of Rivers.

"I saw it proved this afternoon," he said, in a voice of emotion. "I never shall forget! You stepped in and risked yourself to save me. I never shall forget, Mr. Rivers!"

"Doc, to most folks, including you, old son," said

Rivers, "and concerning what happened back yonder, I'm just as pleased to forget my part of it, if it's the same to you."

"Certainly," said Philip. "I never shall mention it again!"

"Thanks," said Rivers. "Now we better blow along if we want to get home before the night comes."

"The jail is in the town, I suppose?" said Philip.

"Jail?" said the other.

He closed his eyes, and his face was a study of pain.

"Jail?" he repeated. "There ain't any jail for you, as far as I'm concerned. No, kid. You forget. I'm your friend. Now, you write that down in red ink and never let it rub out!"

He patted the massive shoulder of Philip anxiously, as he said this, and Philip opened his big blue eyes and smiled affectionately at his companion.

"You are very kind," said Philip. "I never shall dream of doubting you!"

So great was the friendship of Rivers, that after a time he insisted that Philip should take his turn on the horse, and he seemed genuinely distressed when the boy assured him that he preferred to remain on foot.

Their way led through a narrow cañon, presently, with the walls shooting straight up on either hand. In the center a brook twisted back and forth raising gentle and sad echoes up and down the little valley.

All was damp and cool. Vines hung from the rocks; the brush seemed sprinkled with spray. And con-

stantly the broken trail turned here and there among the boulders or the great trees.

"Kid," broke out Rivers, after they had gone for some time in silence, "how come that you ain't scared of death?"

"Of what?" asked Philip, ready enough to be alarmed.

"Of what, he asks me!" echoed Doc Rivers. "Sweet—sufferin'—mama!"

Then he exploded: "Of the Chisholms, kid! Ain't they enough to make a nightmare in the middle of the day, I ask you? I tell you, old son, that they'd eat you raw, without no salt and without no paprika!"

"The Chisholms!" replied the boy. "They looked very dangerous, didn't they?"

"Didn't they only that!" sighed Rivers.

"But as a matter of fact," said Philip brightly, "they turned out to be very easily handled. They were like old wolves; not half so formidable as the noise they made and the picture of their snarling. You know the one called Bert—really, he simply crunched in my arms like shingles, or something. Oh, no, they're not at all dangerous!"

Rivers laid his hand on the bump which decorated his head.

"Of course," exclaimed Philip, blushing when he saw what he had said, "they got in a lucky blow at you—"

"Lucky?" said Rivers. "Lucky?"

He was silent again, only shaking his head from

time to time, while they climbed to the head of the ravine and came out upon gently rolling ground.

The sun was westering fast; the eastern mountains were turning pale gold; all the cañon mouths, stretching into the wider valley, were brushed across with delicate mists.

"Yonder's where we bunk tonight," said Rivers.

"Ah?" said Philip, and following the designated direction, he made out through a break among the trees a distant glimpse of a farmhouse with a tangle of smaller buildings and many fences around it.

"Does a friend of yours live there?" asked Philip.

"Friend?" repeated the other, his eye wandering blankly. "Friend?"

"I mean, some acquaintance? Or is it a wayside tavern?"

"That," said Rivers with instant heartiness, "is what it sure ain't. There's nothing wayside and there's nothing tavern about it, and that you can take from me. But as for the friend part—" he hesitated.

"It's my mother's place," he finished shortly.

"Your mother!" echoed the boy.

They had passed into the bottom of a little swale of ground, and there Philip paused and instinctively took off his battered old felt hat. So he looked up with a smile and saw nothing before him but the rich blue of the sky, with two or three happy white clouds blowing softly across it.

"Your mother!" said Philip again. "Ah, well—how I wish that I had one!"

"You do?" asked Rivers, with much curiosity. "Why, might I ask?"

"Why?" cried Philip. "But of course you're joking! A mother? When I think of gentleness, goodness, sweetness, I think of that word. And some day," he went on softly, to himself, as it were, "some day I may find her! My own mother!"

This tremendous and beautiful thought so filled him that his eyes shone with tears, and these he brushed away, unashamed of showing them, and smiling happily at his friend.

"If you want to find her, I hope you do," answered Rivers briskly. "I hope she pans out pretty well, too. You never can tell. But for my part, I'd rather take a header in a wildcat mine than bank on a mother turnin' out so fine!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Philip stiffly.

"Aw, you'll find out," replied Rivers with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But the hand that cared for you when you were sick," said Philip, turning the pages of some book in his mind, "and the voice that—"

"I know what you mean, all right," broke in Doc Rivers, "but you save those ideas for somebody else. Ma has been too busy to do any caring for the sick. But as a grand cow-woman," he went on, raising his voice with a real enthusiasm, "she stands off by herself. Wait till you see her. And if you don't see enough, you'll hear enough. I'll promise you that!"

He chuckled as he spoke.

Philip found himself condemned to a long fit of

musings. For he began to guess that there was much of interest to him that was not of interest to Doc Rivers, and no matter with how kindly an eye he looked upon his companion, or with what determination he tried to see only the good, he could not help feeling that Doc Rivers was, at the best, not exactly a poetic soul. About his very face there was something dry, withered, practical. One never could imagine him failing in a pinch to have very nearly what he wanted; but Philip could not see him storming the cloud-lost heights of any great ideal.

He was sorry to guess at such things, and he promised himself that he would suspend all judgment until Rivers had a chance to speak more clearly for himself both in words and in actions.

In the meantime, they were voyaging steadily across the hills, the mustang at a trot, and Philip at an easy, swinging run. Rivers, keeping the horse just behind, watched the boy go down hill and up dale, never slackening in his pace, while the strangely luminous dusk of the mountains closed in about them, and just ahead, the yellow lights of the ranch buildings began to glimmer cheerfully.

When they came to the barn behind the house, Philip was breathing easily. More easily, indeed, than the big wolf-dog which had dogged his heels.

And he heard Rivers mutter, as the latter dismounted, "All steel—and no wear out!"

CHAPTER XI

"WE'LL be just on time for supper," said Doc Rivers. "We'll wash over here."

They came from the barn to the smooth-beaten ground behind the house, and there they found a pump, with a wooden stand beneath it, a bucket, and several basins of granite wear, rusted thin in many spots. There was still enough light for them to wash by, and they hurried through the ceremony and went on towards the house.

There were many lights inside, and there was a stir of many voices, and the fragrance of cookery steamed through the air and reached the nostrils and the very innermost spirit of Philip, for he had gone many and many a mile since lunch time.

They stamped across the creaking boards of the rear porch, a screen door screeched under the hand of Rivers, and then Philip found himself blinking, his heart bumping and thumping, as he stood in the presence of the first dinner table he ever had seen.

That table was so big that there were two lamps, one for each end, suspended by chains from the ceiling, and under the double glow Philip saw more than a dozen faces.

All were men, saving two at the head of the table. And there, presiding, was a woman with a square,

brown face, and small, bright eyes, and stubby, strong hands.

She pointed with her knife.

"Take that dog out of the house!"

Loafer crowded back against the legs of Philip and snarled in silent defiance.

"Why, doggone me if it ain't a wolf!" said the lady of the square brown face.

And she leaned forward, more interested than before.

"I'll take him away," said Philip, greatly disconcerted by the sudden battery of faces turned upon him and his dog.

His mind was spinning, too; it was not thus that gentlemen and ladies conversed together at the board in the books which he had read!

"Aw, wait a minute!" growled Doc Rivers. "Ma, this here is a special friend of mine—"

"The dog?" asked Mrs. Rivers, without a smile.

"Have a heart," said Mr. Rivers, with a rapid and murmuring voice. "I'm gunna explain things when I get a chance. Hey, kid, you can take care of the dog in here, can't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Philip. "He always sits behind me. If he were outdoors, and happened to meet another dog," he hesitated.

"We'd be minus a dog, ya mean?" said the lady of the house. "All right, you two. Pull up a couple of chairs and break in down there. Hey, Chang, rustle some more chuck. Skinny's back again."

They drew up two chairs, obediently, Philip hardly

daring to look about him, so numerous were the strangers. He was cold with excitement, and with fear.

"But if that dog does anything wrong," said Mrs. Rivers, "I'll skin him, (young man!)"

She turned from the subject of the dog and canted her knife athwart her body towards a girl seated at her left.

"You ain't seen Maizie yet, Doc."

"Hello, Maizie," said Doc.

"Hello, Skinny. How's every little thing?"

"Oh, not bad."

"That's great. You been Dormaning, I hear. How many did you catch?"

"Nothing," said Doc, frowning at his plate.

"Where's the sheriff?"

"How do I know? Still wandering, I suppose."

"But you got lame and took pity on your hoss. Was that it?"

The girl chuckled, and there was loud laughter from the men. Philip, under cover of that burst of mirth, which he did not understand, looked about him at lean, weather-hardened faces, and mouths that gaped widely with the laughter, and forelocks uncontrollable by brush or comb.

He looked past them at the matron, whose habitual frown had not unbent for this poor sally of wit. He looked hastily from her to the girl, and there his eyes stopped suddenly. It was like pulling up a wagon with all the brakes set down hill.

The ladies of his dreams were pale and delicate,

large-eyed, languid, toying with harps and velvet clad, and their golden hair, intertwined with ropes of pearl, flashed like rich metal beside snowy throats and bosoms.

But Maizie, yonder, though she was as brown as a berry, though her hair was sun-faded in its outer puffs, though her eye was as bright and straight as the eye of a man, somehow stepped instantly into a corner of his inner world. She was wonderfully pretty, bright, and gay.

Those eyes of hers crossed his glance, and Philip looked hastily down at his ham and eggs.

"Where you been Dormaning, Skinny?" called that rich and carelessly musical voice.

"Oh, up the valley."

"That's kind of general," said Maizie.

"Why you pickin' on me?" asked Doc gloomily.

"If I get famous, it won't be for you, Maizie. Been taking your share of scalps, lately?"

"I try to keep busy," said Maizie. "I've been working on Charlie, here, but I don't seem to get on."

She laid her hand on the arm of the stalwart who sat beside her. Instantly his face was painted crimson, and roars of appreciative laughter rushed from every throat.

Philip listened, amazed. No, they were not from the world of his dream. They were far, far from that! Only the girl, somehow, was fitting in—in some remote corner, some garden spot.

"But Charlie's my darling," said Maizie, "until I

can get somebody else. Aren't you, Charlie? Jus' for a day or two?"

Philip, looking up under cover of the mirth, found that the straight, keen eyes of the girl were full upon his face, inquiring and probing and testing with a sort of practiced skill. In haste, he looked down again, but attention was bound to fall upon him.

That rather husky, rich voice called again: "Skinny!"

"Aw, leave me be, will you?" growled Doc Rivers. "Call off the dogs, Ma, will you?"

"Skinny, if you're rude to me, Charlie will fight you. Won't you, Charlie? Skinny, I just think you're terrible rude not to introduce your friend. Why keep the good things all to yourself, Skinny?"

"Him?" snapped Doc Rivers. "Name of Phil."

"Hello, Phil," called the girl. "Tickled to death to meet you. Ain't we, boys?"

"Are you?" said Philip, sitting very erect, and bowing a little to them all, while his great blue eyes turned in a frightened manner from face to face. "Are you really?" said Philip.

Silence was flicked across the room, like the shadow of a flying lariat. He was aware that everyone was staring quizzically at him. Even Mrs. Rivers was giving him some attention.

"Of course I am," said Maizie, tilting forward and smiling gently upon him.

There was something absorbing in her gaze, and something which enveloped Philip as with many magnetic hands. He grew rather breathless.

"You all are very kind," said Philip. "Of course, it's delightful to me to be here."

The silence continued. Glances began to be interchanged.

"Hey, Skinny!" called Mrs. Rivers. "Where did you get it?"

"We still don't know your last name, Phil," said the girl.

Philip colored a little more deeply.

"I have no other name," said he. "My only name is Philip. I—I—"

He paused. Curious, unsympathetic eyes were fastened upon him.

So he proceeded with difficulty on his explanation.

"I really am hoping to find a father and my mother, you see," said he.

"Oh!" said the girl.

But her's was the only voice which spoke. All knives and forks had been laid down.

"You haven't come to cigarettes yet, boys," sang out Maizie. "I hope you have luck, Phil!"

The hint from Maizie started the eating again, but a battery of penetrating side-glances continually darted at Philip. He felt that he had done something very wrong, very odd; he could not for his life guess what.

At the farther end of the table, Maizie looked at Mrs. Rivers, and the latter lady was seen to tap a significant finger against her forehead.

Then: "Hey, Dick, don't you dare light that butt! You wait till you're outside," cried Mrs. Rivers. "I

never seen such young fools. Always soakin' themselves in nicotine. No wonder they can't see a cow bogged down or tell a calf from a hayrick. First thing in the morning—last thing at night—tobacco. They're all soaked in it!"

"Maybe not all," said Maizie. "How about you, Phil? Your fingers look pretty clean. You a cigarette fiend like the rest?"

"I never have smoked," said Philip, shaking his head.

"What do *you* do, the last thing at night?" asked Maizie, gently.

"I say a prayer before I go to sleep," said Philip.

Dammed up waters will at last break through. An enormous tide of laughter rushed and boomed and reëchoed through the room. And Philip sat up white and still and looked straight before him. A sudden dimness had crossed his eyes, and something like hot quicksilver was working through his heart.

Then, as the laughter eased a little, Doc Rivers said loudly: "I forgot to tell you about Phil when I introduced him. He's out lookin' for work, y'understand? His last job was just a little affair up the valley this afternoon, where the two Chisholms jumped him. All he done was choke Bert and throw him on the floor, plumb silly, and back Archie through the door and make him take water before everybody. So Phil is feeling real kind of impatient and he'd like to get some work. Maybe some of you boys could find him something to do? No? The way you was laughing, I

thought maybe that you could! I thought maybe that you was hankerin' to! But I guess you was sized up wrong. Maybe you wouldn't be interested? No, I see that you ain't!"

CHAPTER XII

THE challenging speech of Doc Rivers seemed to Philip to contain so much savagery that he would have burst out with an explanation and showed how simple the fight with the two Chisholms had been, but he had no chance to do so, for Doc turned to him sharply and said: "And don't you, like a damn fool, try to talk yourself down."

A puncher whose buck teeth made him appear continually to smile, now turned gravely to Rivers: "We ain't been hearing crooked?" he suggested. "You really seen that happen? I mean, it was *both* of the Chisholms, that was hunting together?"

"It was both of them," Doc assured him. "And here's the proof that I was around at that party."

He pointed to the lump which stood out on the side of his head, and though this was proof of a most oblique nature, yet it was not questioned in the slightest degree: Philip became a marked man, and the admiration and wonder of the table was poured out upon him.

It worried instead of pleasing him, for the wild and sagacious faces of these men made him feel like a child in their presence, and he was afraid that he had been highly overvalued by them all. Like one who has made a false reputation, he wanted to be away from

that house as soon as possible, and he was glad, above all, when the meal came to an end.

In the midst of the screeching of chairs pushed back from the table at the end of the meal, and the scraping and clumping of high-heeled boots, Mrs. Rivers confronted young Philip.

"And *you're* another of these gunfighters, are you?" asked that formidable woman.

"No, no," Philip assured her. "I never fought with a gun in my life!"

She returned with uncompromising force: "Well, don't you start the bad habit around this here ranch. That's all!"

And she swung past him with the stride of a man, and a man's swing of the shoulders. Philip felt that there were smiles about him, but no one would meet his eye, and there was a covert quality about this mirth that made it more than scornful, he felt. They would laugh aloud, when they were well out of sight.

He was glad when Doc Rivers took him away from the crowd and, at the kitchen door, got a plate of food for Loafer. That hungry monster wolfed it down in an instant, and then Doc took his companion around the side of the house and to the front veranda.

"We can sit out here, pretty safe," he said. "What a lot of long-horned fools they all sounded like! Don't you pay no attention to 'em, kid. They're plumb ignorant. It's the lack of education that makes a gent act like a fool when he spots anything new. You're new. So they smiled. But you keep your spurs off of your heels till you start to ride 'em. They dunno

you, kid. They dunno, or they wouldn't act that way. Smoke?"

They sat on the veranda, their chairs tipped back, looking out through the tall trees which formed the rude natural garden of the house. There was not much wind, but enough to sift the dry needles with a whisper from time to time, and enough to make the trees sway gently from side to side in the upper branches. The moon was up, and the moon glow filled the upper sky with palest gray blue. Since sunset, a chill had been dropping down, and now the air was wonderfully pure and sweet, but without the biting edge with which Philip was familiar in the upper mountains.

"That Maizie, she's a devil," said Doc Rivers. "She's an outstandin' bronco, and him that busts her and teaches her manners and gentles her down will be doin' a man-sized job, I tell you. But what she says, don't you mind. She's gotta talk so much. If she didn't talk, she'd choke, y'understand? She's got a sweeter way with her, she's pretty and bright, but her and Ma are cut out of the same kind of rawhide. You never could think they was the same, but they're drawed together a good deal. Twins, they are, Twins!"

And Doc Rivers grunted and then swore softly in the dimness.

Philip settled back more comfortably in his chair. The air was delicious, the beauty of the trees filled his eyes, the scent of the cigarette was a delicate aroma in his nostrils; and so he surrendered to the

situation and let Doc talk. But all the time another voice was at work in his memory, stirring quiet pools and still lakes never before touched.

It was Maizie.

He had revolted against the comparison between her and Mrs. Rivers, that blunt driver and maker of men, but he felt that there must be some justification for the comparison. At least, in both he sensed a purpose as strong and as steady as steel. But there were other qualities in her which, he assured himself, never could have been found in Mrs. Rivers at any time in her life. He struggled with this problem of Maizie. She was unlike the delicate women of his books and his thoughts as spider web is different from wire. But there was an electric charge running through that wire. He tingled with it still; it shot through him and made him breathless. In one instant he was vastly intrigued and vastly afraid.

Doc Rivers finished his cigarette, then announced that the cold was too much for him, and that they had better go to bed. So he guided Philip through the house, and up the carpeted, worn stairway, and so to a small attic room where there were two cots.

"I don't rate nothing more'n this," he said gloomily. "You'd think, to hear Ma talk, that I was still a little kid in short pants. She ain't got any understanding of a man!"

"Hasn't she?" asked Philip in amazement. "I thought that she must understand almost everything in the world!"

"You thought so? Well—I dunno. There's a lot of folks that agrees with you."

Doc Rivers at once began to undress, but the room was stuffy with the heat which it had absorbed through the roof all during the hours of sunshine, and it made Philip think with longing of the coolness of the outdoors. Moreover, he had not finished the retasting and summarizing of the events of the day, which had piled so thickly upon him that to untangle them was like untangling a delicate problem.

He went down the stairs and out into the front yard—like a forest with its masses of great trees—and he had barely left the veranda steps when he heard the loud, clear voice of Mrs. Rivers saying: "I dunno. I tell you what I think. You'll never have no luck out of him. Because there ain't any luck in him. If you got a foundered hoss, sell him if you can, shoot him if you can't. Because he'll never do you no good. You cross him off your books. That's all that I can say!"

Philip turned to retreat, but as he did so, Mrs. Rivers and Maizie came clearly into view in the moonlight that poured down among the pines. He felt that he should step forward to announce himself, but he was afraid to do so, because it might look, he thought, as though he had been following them and spying upon them, and their talk seemed to have been of the most private character. Where he stood, the shadow fell steep and thick, and he was certain that he would not be seen. Having hesitated one instant, nothing

could have induced him to go forward to confront them.

Maizie, as one in the greatest trouble, closed both her hands together and then pressed them against her breast; she looked up, and the moon gave a sudden transparency to her complexion so that she melted easily into all of Philip's dreams of lovely women.

"There has to be some way out," said Maizie.

The retort of Mrs. Rivers was, as usual, brisk, brief, and to the point.

"You're gunna hang onto this here job until you make a fool of yourself. Maizie, quit it. It's man's work!"

"And we have no man to do it," said Maizie in the quiet of despair.

At that, a mad impulse came to Philip. He wanted to dash forward and say in a ringing voice: "Perhaps God has sent me to you! Let me try to work for you. I may not be strong enough, but I shall try!"

However, he was instantly shuddering with embarrassment at the very thought of surrendering to such a bold impulse.

"What can you do?" asked Mrs. Rivers bluntly. "You can't take your job to the sheriff. Well, that rules the law out of it, I guess."

"It does," said Maizie. "I'd have to trust to a friend."

Said the virago: "It'd be a pretty good friend that would stick himself up agin the whole Purchass crew. Oh, Maizie, when you see you're beat, throw down your cards. Don't bet on 'em. Don't chase good

money after lost money. Be a sport and take **your** licking."

"I could do that," said the girl. "I could do that as well as the next one, but I'm not going to quit while Jolly's life is at stake."

"Why doesn't the fool cut and run for it?" asked Mrs. Rivers.

"Because he thinks that after he leaves, the Purchass clan will come down on us."

"Would his being there keep them from coming?" asked Mrs. Rivers tersely.

"I know that it ain't logical," admitted Maizie. "But there's some things that you can't be logical about."

"I don't know what they are," responded the older woman buntly. "But tell me what you hope? Now you just tell me why you come over here, will you?"

"Because I wanted to get advice from you, dear Aunt Agnes!"

"Dear Aunt Agnes your foot," said Mrs. Rivers. "You come over here because you think that maybe Doc could help you out of the pinch."

"Skinny?" cried the girl in certain, scornful tones.

"You see that's a joke, don't you?" chuckled Mrs. Rivers. "And it *is* a joke. But you didn't know that for sure until you looked at him at my supper table tonight and saw for yourself how thin he'd flatten out if the Purchass gang landed on top of him. He'd be so thin, honey, that you could use him for gold leaf—except that he ain't made of that metal!"

She began to laugh at this thought of her own, and

her laughter reminded Philip horribly of the braying of a mule.

Maizie laughed a little, too.

"You're too hard on Skinny," she said. "But after all, you're right. He wouldn't do for the job. And I *did* have him sort of in mind when I rode over."

Mrs. Rivers put her arm around the shoulders of the girl.

"I love you, honey," said her harsh voice, "because you're honest to me, though you're a lyin' little devil to the rest of the world."

"Tell me," said Maizie suddenly, "what about the new one?"

"Who?" asked Mrs. Rivers. "That Philip? That high-headed young fool?"

CHAPTER XIII

IN one instant the heart of Philip had leaped into his mouth; in the next it had sunk again like lead, until it remained as a cold lump in his throat. He had been picked up—and cast away instantly as worthless junk.

He hoped that the girl would come at least one step to his defense and he was not mistaken.

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I don't know. Did you hear what Skinny said?"

"About him licking the two Chisholms? I heard it. I tell you, my honey lamb, that nobody ever licked two of the Chisholms on one day. Nobody!"

"Skinny said so, and I believe him!"

Mrs. Rivers shook her head; then she argued the matter with some subtlety with herself.

"If he was good enough to lick the pair of them—which ain't hardly possible—then he's just what I told you—a high-headed young fool!"

Philip was worried by the expression. He could understand fool, well enough, and he would have been the first to agree that he was most ignorant of the world and of its ways; but he didn't understand what "high-headed" could mean. It was explained almost at once, for the girl asked: "Did you ever see a more humble sort of a boy than Philip? I watched him. He was pink all over when Skinny told what he had done."

Mrs. Rivers snorted.

"And I don't see," said the girl, "why you call him high-headed. He could hardly raise his head out of his plate during all of suppertime."

She laughed, a little scornfully, and that one touch of scorn from her hurt the boy more than all the bludgeoning which he had received from the lips of Mrs. Rivers.

The latter began to explain with her usual terseness:

"What's a high-headed horse?" she demanded.

"A fool that can't work," said the girl readily enough.

"That don't mean it can't move?"

"No. They often have plenty of foot."

"Well, they have too much spirit, I'd say."

"Maybe they have."

"That's this new boy."

"But he hardly could look up."

"You listen, my girl. You got to give him the spur to start him. After that, he won't work. He won't cut out cows for you. He'll run away and smash you into a tree. He'll break your neck."

"I don't see how you make that out!" murmured Maizie, thinking with a dark brow.

"Well, I'll tell you. How big are the Chisholms?"

"Oh, I know them. They're brutes, of course."

"Does he look fit to handle even one of 'em?"

"No, no. Of course not. But looks—"

"They don't tell all that's in a man?"

"No."

"You bet they don't," exclaimed Mrs. Rivers, and

slapped Maizie heavily and loudly on the shoulder, so that the girl began to rub the stinging spot.

"You bet they don't," repeated the older woman. "Now, if he's got enough in him to handle one of the Chisholms, I call it wonderful. I'd call him a man."

"So would I. You think just the way that I do."

"But look here—is he very big?"

"He has a pair of shoulders!"

"Sure he has. So have the Chisholms. I tell you, if he could beat the pair of them, then he's more'n a man. He's a devil."

"All right," said Maizie, shrugging her shoulders. "All right. I think he could be driven with silk threads."

"Most men are fools," said Mrs. Rivers. "All girls are. Now listen here: I know men. I paid for my knowing. I paid forty-five thousand dollars for it. And I've been working like an idiot day and night ever since I put my man in a grave trying to make back what he lost for me. I know men; I've paid for the knowing. I tell you this: steer clear of that kid with his baby eyes. He'll wreck you."

"I don't think he will—I don't think he's too hard to be handled!"

"You sassy young flirt!" exclaimed Mrs. Rivers. "D'you know more than me?"

"No, no, Aunt Agnes!"

"Well, then, take my word for it. He's dangerous. He's too dangerous for you to be handling him. You keep away from him. That's all I'll say."

"But suppose that he could save my poor Jolly?"

"He might save him; he'd break him before he got home like a bad egg. That's what Jolly is. He's a bad egg."

"Aunt Agnes, I won't let you say that to me!"

"Now you got your blood up. Your family's sacred, is it? Well, I'm sorry for you! Good night, Maizie. You make me tired. I gunna go to bed! Come along."

"I'll stay out here a while."

"What you gunna do? Wait for one of the punchers? You gunna hold the hand of one of the boys?"

"Aunt Agnes, you make me out a—"

"No, I don't. But I know. I was young once, though I never had your face, thank God. What I picked up was bad enough, after all!"

She turned her back on her companion and then stamped away for the house, the gravel grinding loudly under her heels. Maizie looked after her with a short little, soundless laugh. Then she disappeared among the trees.

A cold muzzle touched the hand of Philip, and he looked down at the great head of Loafer. The dog slipped out ahead of him, as though urging him to take up the trail of the foe but Philip merely smiled at him sadly and beckoned him back. There was a great misery in his heart. It chiefly concerned Jolly, for he feared that Maizie was married and that this was the name of her husband. And yet he would not face the reason that made him fear she was wedded.

He turned away through the woods, wandering

blindly, trying to think, but never managing to. Pictures took the place of thoughts. He kept seeing Maizie in the moonlight; he kept hearing her voice. He was soothed and excited.

Out of that darkness of the mind, he suddenly came upon a sound of muffled sorrow; someone was sobbing. He passed through a single row of poplars, silver-bright and polished in the moonshine, and there he saw a girl seated on a log with her head buried in her arms. He knew it was Maizie by the paleness of her hair, and by the roundness of the back of her neck; and he was filled with foolish delight and with foolish fear.

Even then he would have turned back—or thought he would—but Loafer slipped ahead and sniffed at her dress, and growled. So she looked up, and then she sprang to her feet.

"Hello, hello!" said Maizie. "I must of fallen asleep. That's a silly thing, eh? You saved me from pneumonia, maybe! Look," she added, "I was crying in my sleep, too!"

She dashed away the tears with a fine gesture.

"You bet I'd never cry when I was awake," said Maizie. "Ask the world, and they'll tell you!"

Philip could not speak. He thought it was the bravest and the very finest thing that ever he had found—outside of a book. Well, books grew less important, after a time!

"I'm going in," said the girl. "Thanks for wakin' me up. Or should I thank your dog?"

She tossed that over her shoulder and went on

towards the house. All that she was pleased Philip. He wanted to stop her at once, but it was a delight to see the way she walked, softly and with a swing—unlike women, surely unlike men as music is unlike the harsh chorusing of a storm in the mountains.

At length he strode beside her.

"Would you stop for a little moment?" asked Philip.

"Sure I will, if you got anything to say," said the girl. "What is it, Phil?"

"I want to say," said Philip, and stuck there, looking down at her. "I want to say," he began again.

"That we were a rough crew at the table, eh? We *are* rough. You gotta get a thick skin around us, Phil!"

He waved that suggestion amiably away.

"I didn't mean that. I meant you—"

At this, he felt he had gone too far, and blushed; but either the moonlight covered his hot color, or else she was too earnest to notice such a small thing.

"Something's bothering you," said the girl. "All right. I'll listen. All the boys tell me their troubles," she went on. "What's bothering you, old son?"

"You are," said the grave Philip.

"I?" said the girl, and lifted her eyebrows. He saw that he had blundered and wished mightily that he could have said something else, but he seemed in too deep to be saved. She, however, was wonderfully kind.

"Have I stepped on your toes?" she asked him gently. "I'd be sorry about that. Because I like you, Phil."

"Do you?" cried Philip. "Do you really like me?"

"Of course I do," said the girl. "Why not?"

"How wonderful," said Philip, "and how strange."

"Not a bit. Because you look like a straight-goer, to me. I hate the boys that interfere. I like to see 'em run straight."

"I don't understand," said Philip.

"It's just English," said she, "or it ought to be."

"Will you be patient, then, and let me try to explain?" he asked her. "I have not talked with many people; I don't know a great deal."

"You go ahead," she encouraged him. "Patient is my name. Maizie Patient or Patient Maizie is what they call me, or what they ought to call me. Go on, old hoss."

"If you will try to understand, I must begin at the first."

"You go right ahead."

"It began at the table, this evening," said Philip. "It gave me so much happiness to look at you!"

CHAPTER XIV

At this, she drew back from him a step and frowned.

"Hello, hello!" said Maizie. "What's coming now?"

"I beg your pardon," appealed Philip. "I don't know how to talk to you!"

"Don't?" she asked, in what appeared to him to be a most suspicious voice. "I dunno. You seem to me to get right on. What comes next?"

"Afterwards," said he, "I could not go to sleep. The room was warm."

"Skinny's room is a kennel," she agreed.

"I came out to walk. I thought I was coming to enjoy the cool sweet air. But I'm afraid that I was only walking out to think about you."

"Am I a kind of a puzzle, maybe?" asked Maizie.

"You're so beautiful," said Philip.

"I'm which?" she gasped. "All right, all right!"

"Have I said something wrong again?" he asked.

"Do you always start right in leading trumps?" inquired Maizie.

"I don't know what you mean," replied Philip.

"There goes the joker," remarked Maizie. "Aces wild, I suppose."

"Shall I stop?"

"Not a bit," said Maizie. "I enjoy it a lot. It's different."

"Thank you," said Philip. "I was thinking of your beauty, and of your lovely voice."

"Well, well, well!" broke in Maizie.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You go so fast we'll be in town before we have a chance to enjoy the ride. But go right ahead, Phil. Where did you learn to work?"

"I was raised on Pillar Mountain; my uncle taught me everything," said he.

"I'd like to meet the gay old boy," nodded she.

"He's really a sad and quiet man," said Philip.

"Sure he is; sure he is!" murmured she. "I wouldn't doubt you for a minute, Philip. So am I on Mondays. You were doing a lot of thinking—you left off there—shall we sit down here on this rock?"

"I'm afraid you'd catch cold," said Philip earnestly.

"You're which?" echoed she.

"Did you understand me?" he asked.

"I did," she replied, "but they wouldn't believe this in church. Go on, Phil. I don't know where you're going, but I love your footwork."

He sighed, and then he shook his head. Nearly everything was quite beyond him. It was like listening to a foreign language.

"While I was thoughtful, and not seeing things before me very clearly, all at once I heard two voices—and you and Mrs. Rivers —"

"What! Were you there?"

"I want to explain," cried Philip. "At first I was

about to step forward; I didn't want to be an eaves-dropper. But somehow, I hadn't the courage to step forward. I'm afraid I'm very timid before women!"

"You are? I'd never say so. I think you're a hero," said the girl.

"I don't understand you," replied Philip.

"I knew you wouldn't," replied she. "But go ahead. You stood there and listened to the whole talk?"

"Can you forgive me?"

"You got roasted and salted down by Mrs. Rivers, didn't you?"

"Of course she doesn't know me," remarked Philip.

"But I'm not thinking of what she said about me. I was thinking, on the contrary, of your own difficulties."

"You talk just like a book, Phil," said she.

"I'm sorry," he protested.

"I like it," said she. "It's a good book, I think. I like the way that it starts."

"I could not help hearing," he went on, hot of face, and gripping his hands, but determined to go through to the end, "I could not help hearing that you were in great trouble, and that you were intensely worried about a Mr. Jolly who is, I presume, very ill—"

Maizie began to laugh. And Philip stopped to listen. He was rather angry. He was sure it was very rude of her, and yet he was delighted with that low, rather husky laughter. It floated into his very soul.

"Jolly's my kid brother," said she. "I mean—he's older, but he's just a crazy kid. Go on!"

"I'm glad he's your brother!" said Philip with ardor.

"You are? Why?"

"Because I thought he might be your—I—I mean I thought—"

"Go on, Phil. Don't stop for the little things. What are you driving at?"

Then he managed to say briefly: "You seemed to be in great trouble; and only a moment ago I found you crying—"

"In my sleep!" she protested.

"Yes, yes. I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to question what you—I—"

"You found me crying. What's the next step?"

"I hoped that if I offered my service to you, you might be persuaded to use me, if you think that I could help!"

At this, she interlaced her fingers and stared up at him for a long time, until the moonlit face and the great shadows of the eyes began to trouble the very heart of Philip.

"You got me beat," said the girl.

"I hope not," murmured he.

"You're all by yourself," she went on. "I'd need a magic carpet to keep up with you. Phil, are you offering yourself to ride along and help me in my trouble?"

"Nothing," said Philip, "would make me so happy as to think that I was making you happy—I mean to say—"

"You say it beautifully," she answered. "But wait a minute—I don't want to be a wolf."

"A wolf?"

"Or a golddigger."

He was bewildered.

"You know the Purchass crew, do you?"

"I never have heard of them."

"Did you say that you lived in the mountains, Phil?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you never heard of the Purchass tribe?"

"No."

"You never even heard of the Colonel, I suppose?" she asked ironically.

"I don't know what colonel you mean," said he.

"But there's only one!"

"Colonel Purchass?"

"Let it go, then! Let it go! But I'll try to tell you about the Purchass people. Let's begin at the Chisholms. You know them?"

"I've only met them once," said Philip.

"You've only—well," murmured the girl, "you *are* all by yourself. But what did you think of them?"

"I'm afraid that I didn't like them very well."

"You didn't like them? Nobody ever liked them. Not even in Sunday school. They're too bad even to pray for. Weren't they a pair of devils?"

"They frightened me very much," admitted Philip.

At this, she stared again; and finally she began to nod.

"It looks like we can do business," she said. "But all the money will be on your side. All we can put in will be good will and the naming of the ropes."

"I try to follow you," explained Philip in despair, "but I don't seem able to."

"I'll cut it short, Phil. The Chisholms bother you. But they're just a pair that belong to the Purchass tribe."

"Belong to them?" he echoed.

"That's it. Body and soul. Slaves. Worse. They go to old man Purchass and ask can they be allowed to draw breath."

"It seems very strange," said Philip.

"Strange? It's worse. It's a nightmare. Well, Phil, the Purchass crew is after Jolly; and that's why I came over here. I didn't think there'd be any help here. But I just had to come. I couldn't sit home any longer. I was getting dizzy, I was so scared!"

"Yes!" said Philip, his heart beginning to swell.

And all at once she threw out her hands to him, and she pressed them against his breast.

"I love dear Jolly!" she said. "Because he never was any good—he was always so crazy—everybody loves dear old Jolly!"

Philip trembled violently.

"He is your brother," he said huskily, "and I'm sure that I would like him very much!"

"They're after Jolly! They're after Jolly!" she repeated in a frenzy, though she kept her voice low by dint of clenching her teeth, "and I'm not going to let them get him!"

"I want to help you!" said he.

"Dear Phil, I love you for saying that!"

He trembled more violently than ever; and a blur

of darkness swam across the moon; his heart was a small triphammer, striking rapidly and regularly in the center of his forehead.

"I'm only 'one, though," he suggested.

"One good man—one great man can do anything," she said. "The Colonel might beat them. But he costs too much. We couldn't hire him. He costs too much."

"There's the law of the country!" urged Philip.

"The law wants Jolly almost as bad as the Purchass people want him!"

Then she explained hastily: "It's too long to tell. I can tell you the whole story tomorrow. But if I talk it out now, it'll make me-despair again. I want to go to bed and dream about you, Phil. I want to dream about you riding over with me—"

"I'll have to walk," said Philip. "I have no horse. I hope that won't spoil everything!"

"You—," she began, and then, as had happened before during that odd interview, she seemed to be stopped by some extraneous force.

"Nobody!" she repeated with conviction. "Nobody near you—all out by yourself!"

Then she added: "Will you wait till the morning to hear the whole story?"

"I'll do anything that you wish," said he.

They walked down the winding, half-made walk through the trees and towards the house. One light sparkled from the front of it, shining dimly through the moonlight.

"You're terribly silent, Phil. You're not beginning

to change your mind about this?" she asked suddenly, her hand pressing his arm.

"Ah, no. I was thinking of something else!"

"Of what?" she insisted.

"Of you," said the boy, "and of how glorious and how noble and how good you are!"

"Wait a minute!" said she.

He stopped and she made him face her, saying: "Look me in the eyes!"

And he obeyed her until presently she exclaimed: "Good heavens!"

"Is something wrong?" asked Philip nervously.

Instead of replying, she turned and hurried on towards the house. Only at the veranda steps she paused sharply.

"May I say good night?" he asked her.

At this, her faintly mocking chuckle returned to her.

"It all depends," said she, "but it's a pretty large night. I suppose you may."

He leaned and raising her hand, he pressed it to his lips.

"Good night," said Philip.

"Good heavens," said the girl again, and she went slowly up the steps, looking back at him as though she were very much afraid.

He wondered what he had done that was wrong, and he stood with one foot on the lowest step, looking after her, with one hand pressed against his heart, for there was a great pain of sorrow aching in it.

CHAPTER XV

PHILIP, on his knees until his bones were aching, said all three of Oliver Aytoun's prayers over and over again. He hardly knew the words that were passing through his lips, but the whisper seemed to drain the anguish from his breast, and at last he had peace.

He did not undress. He lay down, wrapped the blanket around him, and watched the moonlight pressing softly through the skylight, gleaming on the varnished back of the chair, and on the tangle of clothes which Doc Rivers had flung upon the floor. Then he would close his eyes and recapture the moments of the evening second by second.

All that day, which had seemed so crowded with gigantic images, now drew far away, as though long years and oceans lay between it and the evening which had followed. Nothing really mattered except the music of Maizie's voice and the trees, as they had stood beneath the moon, and how she had looked in profile, delicately made. And how when her chin was raised. And how when she turned her head and smiled. And how, going up the steps, when she looked back to him, afraid.

Afraid of him!

One moment he could have laughed aloud, joyously, at that. And the next moment he was wretched. He

felt that he could not dare to face her the next day. He had talked like a fool.

At last, after long hours, he drowsed. Finally his shoulder was shaken, and he wakened to find that the dawn was there, and Doc Rivers leaning above him.

"Wake up, kid. Wake up. I been calling you for half an hour and all you been saying is: 'I want to help!' You want to help what?"

Philip sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"I'd better get a plunge into some water. Is there a creek near the house?" he asked.

"Wait a minute. You didn't undress. You look white. You been sick?"

"No," said Philip. "I don't think so."

"You have, though. How's your stomach?"

"It's quite all right, thank you."

"Got a headache, then?"

"No, I never have them."

"Rheumatism, by jiminy! That's from sitting out yonder on the veranda in the evening air. You're soft, kid, in spite of your muscle!"

"I haven't any rheumatism," Philip assured him.

The other scratched his tousled head.

"Ah," he said, very serious, now. "You've got a bit of a bad heart! That's it! D'you feel faint?"

"No, no," murmured Philip. "I'm really all right."

His host stood away, frowning, thoughtful.

"What you do after I went to bed?"

"I just took a little walk."

The voice of Doc changed suddenly.

"You took a little walk, did you? Where?"

"Why—just among the trees, you know."

"Meet anybody—just among the trees?"

"Why—ah—" drawled Philip in confusion.

"You met—why—ah, did you? Hell, is that it?"

And he dropped the subject abruptly, to Philip's great relief.

A bathtub he refused; but in the creek he found the pool and spent fifteen minutes driving himself through the water until his brain was clear, his eyes sharp, and his heart freed from the soft, persistent aching which annoyed him.

After he had shaved and dressed, he came back to meet Doc and they went in to breakfast, together. The punchers already had had their breakfast, for there was work on a distant part of the range. Only the girl, Mrs. Rivers, and the two men sat down together.

To Mrs. Rivers, Philip was able to speak. To the girl, he was only able to murmur meaningless sounds. And then he sat down with his eyes riveted upon his plate.

Conversation, for some moments, lagged. Then Doc Rivers began it.

"Maizie!" he said.

"What you want?"

"You toad!" said he.

"You're another," she replied with ready courtesy.

"You tree-toad!"

"You long-billed butcher bird," said she.

"You chicken hawk!" said he. "Look what you went and done!"

Maizie was silent. At last she said: "Don't go and be a fool, Doc."

"No? I'm gunna, though. I'm gunna talk, me proud beauty!"

"I hate you, Skinny," said she.

"As if you didn't have enough!" said he.

Philip began to sit stiff and straight, his jaw set hard.

"Oh, quit your jawing, will you, you two?" asked Mrs. Rivers.

"It's Maizie," said Doc. "As if she ain't had her hands full. She's gotta have the world with a fence around it. She makes me sick!"

"Don't bother me," said the girl, and Philip noticed with compassion that she was growing flushed.

"She always did make me sick," reiterated Doc Rivers.

"Leave her be, Skinny," said his blunt mother. "You'll be getting in trouble, in a minute."

"Men ain't enough. She wants veal and lamb," declared Doc bitterly.

"Mr. Rivers!" exclaimed Philip suddenly. "May I ask you to step outside with me a moment?"

"I told you so," said Mrs. Rivers to her son, and yawned largely, without making any futile attempt to mask her weariness with the world and with that conversation in particular.

Doc made no reply, but he pointed excitedly at Philip, while continuing his attack upon Maizie.

"Look what you went and done!" he said.

"Skinny," said the girl, angrily, "you're wrong—you—you—I simply hate you, Skinny—"

"You baby thief!" cried Doc Rivers.

"You're simply contemptible!" said the girl. "I won't sit another minute at the table with you—"

And she started to her feet.

Philip rose also. Dreadful rage mastered him; his breast was heaving; his hand he laid upon the bony shoulder of Doc.

"Mr. Rivers," he repeated, "I have something to say to you—outside—"

Still Doc with extraordinary indifference merely shrugged, snapping:

"There you are! You see for yourself! Now sneak out, and let him murder me!"

"I hope he does!" cried the girl, now brightest red, and trembling visibly. "I hope he does!"

She fled to the door.

"What's more," shouted Doc, "he will! He's gunna do it now!"

At the door she turned, hesitant.

"Phil," she said suddenly, "don't be an idiot! Leave him alone!"

And she hurried away.

Philip sat down suddenly in his chair. The madness was struck from his heart and his brain.

"I beg your pardon," he said in the faintest of voices. "I seem to have— I beg your pardon, Mrs. Rivers. I beg your pardon, also, Mr. Rivers—I—the fact is—"

"Aw, go on and eat your breakfast," said Mrs. Rivers.

He could not take that advice. He sat miserably, perspiration dripping down his face. Mrs. Rivers and her son looked steadily at one another.

"Aw, say something, Ma, will you?" said he.

She nodded, and turned her gaze on Philip.

"Don't take no notice of them two," she advised. "They're always clawing at each other's throats. Don't bother about 'em. I never do!"

Philip passed a hand across his brow.

He looked with haunted, wounded eyes at Doc Rivers, and the latter suddenly reached out and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You're all right, kid," he said, "but there's a lot of things that you don't understand."

"Ah, yes," said Philip from his heart of hearts. "How true that is!"

Suddenly Maizie was back in the room.

"You oughta be ashamed, Skinny," she said sweetly. "I'm sorry I spoke that way, Phil. You forgive me?"

And she smiled upon him.

"Look at her," groaned Doc. "Right in the broad daylight. There ain't no shame about a tiger!"

Philip, standing as one stricken, felt the wild pain shoot again through his heart, and with his right hand pressed against it, he strove to drive that pain away.

"Ah, yes," said Philip. "I forgive you!"

CHAPTER XVI

To Philip it seemed impossible that the stern Mrs. Rivers ever should notice him, but he was surprised when she came up to him on her way out of the house, after breakfast. She was ready to mount and ride; no man, it was said, covered more leagues of range during the year than Mrs. Rivers. So, riding whip in hand, she approached Philip and said briskly: "Maizie tells me that you're riding over with her to her house. Now you go slow, young fellow, and maybe you'll have luck."

With this rather enigmatic expression, she walked away; and Philip was flattered, for she had noticed him, and at least not unfavorably.

He did not have a great chance to ponder upon this happy state of affairs, for presently the sheriff and his returning posse swept up to the house. He had failed to keep the trail of the fugitive of the morning before and he was tired and angry, and all of his men with him. Doc Rivers buttonholed him, so to speak, at once, and strove to put oil on very troubled waters. It was a difficult task, for the sheriff was of opinion that it would be an excellent thing to let young Philip go to jail and meditate there on the evils of this world until something was learned about a possible past connection between him and Joe Dorman. The sheriff

was greatly excited. And when Doc protested at length, Philip heard the man of the law say: "You never get something out of nothing. He cleaned up the Chisholms, didn't he? Where did he learn that sort of business, I ask you?"

"Look here, Jeremiah," said Doc Rivers, "if he was that wild he could handle me, couldn't he?"

"He could, son."

"And he didn't. I mean, he stayed right in my hands, and he's here now, pantin' with eagerness to throw himself on the broad breast of the law, you chicken thief! Go and take him, if you want him. He ain't even carryin' a gun."

The sheriff hesitated, and then he scratched his head.

"You're an ornery devil, Doc," he admitted, "but I guess you're right. Only tell the kid that I'm watching him. I got a lot of doubts about him. That's all!"

So the sheriff disappeared, and Doc Rivers came back to his friend.

"The old man has his eyes on you, Phil," said he. "If you blink an eye at anybody, he'll be after you. So watch those two hands of yours. You understand?"

Philip looked aimlessly down at his hands. Yet, in a way, he understood, and said so.

"And now," went on Doc Rivers, "we gotta talk about something else. You start with Maizie. Is that the plan?"

"It is," admitted Philip.

"And who goes as your guardian?"

"Why," said Philip, "I don't understand that!"

"I'd rather," said Doc Rivers, "expose a doggone baby to the hot sun than you to that tiger. Hold on—don't get hot! No, kid, if you go to the house of Maizie Delmar, I go along with you two."

"That," said Philip, "would be delightful."

"I'm gunna go break the good news to Maizie," said Doc Rivers. "This'll make her talk French."

Maizie he found sitting on a corral fence smoking a cigarette and looking over a number of saddle horses.

"Look at that gray," said she.

"I see it," answered Doc.

"You say that the kid ain't ever rode a thing but a mule?"

"That's what he told me."

"D'you think he could sit on that gray?"

"I dunno. It looks peaceful. Got any mean tricks?"

"Hoists up behind a few times in the morning, just to get warm, but that's nothing."

"Nothing to you, honey," said Doc. "Nothing to a string of rawhide and tanned leather like you, but it might bust the kid's neck."

She turned her head languidly and looked him up and down.

"Run along, Skinny," said she. "You bother me."

"I'm gunna bother you more," he answered. "You're takin' the kid away, I hear?"

"I am, and what's it to you?" she said without turning her head.

"Nothing, except that you're taking me, too."

"A mouse with the elephant, eh?"

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Look in your third reader and you'll find out. If you can read that far! No, Skinny, I won't take you. You gotta pay admission to come in to this circus."

"I'm gunna come along," said Skinny. "The kid is under my wing."

"Hum!" said the girl. "I think the gray ought to do. If it's up to his weight. You stay home, Skinny."

"Look here," said Doc. "If you had a son, would you send him into a place where there was yellow fever ragin'—and let him go alone?"

"I'm yellow fever, am I?" asked the girl.

"I was just makin' a comparison," said Doc. "I don't mean to say that you're just like yellow fever. I wouldn't be that unfair to the fever."

"You had a right good touch of me yourself," said Maizie, yawning at this idle chatter.

"I never been the same man since," he replied.

"You never was a man, Skinny; don't kid yourself," answered the girl. "But you stay home."

"Not unless you can ride him away faster than I can follow."

Here she confronted him, slipping down from the fence rail.

"You mean that?"

"Listen, Maizie, do I ever talk to you unless I have to?"

"You're trying to spoil this for me!" she exclaimed.

"He was born simple," explained Skinny. "He never had no education. And you're gunna step out and scalp him, now! You ask me why I'm gunna go

along? To give him chloroform and put him out of pain, when the right time comes."

She bit her lip, eyeing him with bright disdain.

"Saddle up three hosses, then," said she. "That's mine; that pinto mare. You make me tired, Skinny!"

So it was that Maizie surrendered, but dark were the glances she cast at Doc Rivers when the three at last rode forth. Philip, his eyes starting, his face pale, clutched the gray horse hard with his knees, but that mustang went along smoothly enough until it came to a white stone lying near the trail. There are some horses that feel they must have an excuse, however small, before they begin to make trouble, and the gray was one of them. As he reached the stone he leaped wildly into the air, landed on stiff legs, and then spun like a top. Philip was hurled through a prickly bush and got up with ten thousand stinging little cuts imprinted on his face and hands and body. But he caught the gray and mounted again.

"Catch the fool mustang by the head," called Maizie. "Don't let him buck again, Doc!"

"He'd better have it out," suggested Philip. "That was always the way with the roan mule. He had to get his bucking done before he'd do his day's work!"

So saying, since he lacked a whip, he struck the gray with a stick which he held and the mustang promptly obliged with an intricate bit of fence-rowing, followed by some lofty sun-fishing. Twice or thrice Philip was more on the air than on the horse, but he managed with a little luck to keep in his place. After all, it was not as bad as the roan mule; and when the gray

settled down as suddenly as it had begun, he whacked it again. There was only a switching of the tail and a tossing of the head, while the gray broke into a canter.

The girl and Doc closed in together and pursued.

"You said that he couldn't ride!" she said fiercely. "What stuff have you been telling me, Skinny?"

"What stuff has he been telling me?" retorted Doc Rivers. "He's deep. That's all. He's deep!"

But thereafter they worked briskly ahead on the trail and Philip began to enjoy that morning's ride more than anything he had ever done in his life. The morning chill was still in the air; all the forests were hung with gold, or with withering tan, and deep in the heart of the woods something of the night mist remained, like the breathing of dragons from a fairy tale.

They cut across the broad heart of the valley, and the road carried them, now, past big fields, sometimes dark with summer fallow and sometimes golden with unharvested grain, or bright gray-yellow with the stubble. Philip saw houses covered to the eaves, as it were, in wrappings of vines, often with half the leaves fallen, so that they looked like broken veils. All those houses were substantially built, with dormer windows and with gables of an old fashion, for prosperity had been long in the valley, and there had been time for the fence posts to begin to blacken and break, and the rusted wire hung in great sags, or tangled into knots. The surface of the wooden culverts was worn to long, soft splinters which gave up a deadened sound as the hoofs of the horses trampled across them.

All of this was pleasant to the eye of Philip. Even the wreckage of the Bad Lands would have pleased him, in fact, for Maizie was with them! She rode with a little smile, her head tilted up. It was the proud head of youth, it was the mysterious smile of a beautiful girl. Philip was in the land of pure enchantment.

"Skinny," she said at last, "you'd better tell Phil about Jolly."

"Had I better? I had better not," replied Doc Rivers. "You can tell the pretty story yourself. Then maybe you can work up to a happy ending, but dog-gone me if I can see him living happy ever after!"

"All right," said the girl. "I'll tell the story. I want you to know, Phil, that everyone always has loved Jolly. Because he was always straight and fair in everything, and honest, and upstanding. Oh, Phil, there never was really a better-hearted boy than dear old Jolly and—"

"Aw quit it, will you?" broke in Doc Rivers.

"Quit what?"

"Hold on a minute, and I'll tell you the truth about Jolly Delmar."

CHAPTER XVII

DOC RIVERS sighed, after having delivered this announcement. He whistled to Loafer, running ahead of them, and the great dog turned and snarled with white-flashing teeth.

"Pleasant, ain't he?" grinned Doc Rivers. "Well, about old Jolly. He looks something like Maizie."

"Ah!" said Philip.

"Kind of good looking, like her," said Doc Rivers. "Better looking, maybe. I mean, his nose ain't pushed up so much at the end. And his mouth don't look so big."

"Are you gunna tell this story about me or about Jolly?" asked the girl sharply.

"I gotta sort of mix the two of you together," said Doc Rivers, with a malevolent smile. "You sort of illustrate each other; there ain't another pair like you!"

She stirred uneasily in the saddle.

"Just leave my face out of it, will you, Skinny?"

"I can't without leaving out his. All right, kid. We'll leave Jolly with a nose and a mouth, because his sister don't want him to have anything more. Well, Jolly had a happy kind of a way about him. Like Maizie. The difference is that Maizie puts on her good nature and takes it off again like a hat. She puts

it on when she wants to get out o' the sun; she takes it off when there ain't anything to gain by being happy. You can see the wrinkle coming there beside her mouth—"

"I see a dimple," said Philip earnestly.

"You're a little cockeyed," remarked Doc. "But to go on with Jolly: he was remarkably good-natured and cheerful. Folks could get along with him, and pretty often they couldn't get along without him. Especially the girls. He was terrible popular with the girls, kid. They come to him so fast that he had to keep changing them every week, so that there would be enough Jolly to go all around the circle. Just the same with Maizie, here, and the boys."

"Will you leave me out?" asked Maizie angrily.

"I can't," said Doc. "I gotta use you for an example, so's the kid can see Jolly before he lays eyes on him. Of course everybody has been in love with Maizie," continued Doc Rivers. "I was, once. Everybody's been. She don't mind, do you, Maizie?"

Maizie merely sighed, and she turned a saddened pair of eyes towards Philip.

"Will you believe him, Phil?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said Philip. "Of course I won't believe him, if you—"

"If she tells you not to?" broke in Doc. "Don't be a fool in the broad daylight, kid. Now listen about Jolly. He grew up as big as most men and as strong. He could ride as well, shoot as straight, hit as hard, run as fast, as most folks. There was only one thing

that he didn't take to. That was work. He didn't somehow fancy it."

"Like you, Skinny," put in the girl.

"Ay," said Skinny shamelessly, "just like me. I like to sit in the sun, but Jolly, he likes to sit in the lamplight. A dance program fitted Jolly's hand better than a rope, and a waxed floor was smoother going than a new-broke mustang. But at that kind of a thing he was never likely to give up. He went to all the dances in fifty mile of the valley. All around this here range for the last ten years there ain't been any conversation among the girls except what Jolly has said, what Jolly has done; 'Jolly wrote his name right here on my program; ain't Jolly the sweetest thing!' Same way with Maizie. Who's makin' love to Maizie now?"

"Poor old Skinny," said Maizie. "That's his way of making fun, Phil. He can't tell a joke from an axe handle. You gotta get used to him. But he never does no harm around here, except with strangers that take him seriously."

"Well," went on Doc, unperturbed, "somehow you can't get rich holding a girl's hand and telling her that you been looking for her everywhere, and at last you've come home. Jolly has worked up callouses holding hands, but it didn't do. Poor Jolly. Then he decided that maybe there was a short cut, and he tried cards, but the cards wouldn't work for him. He got so's he could run up a pack pretty well, but he always met somebody that could stack better than him, and so he'd go bust and have to come home for a fresh start!"

"Doc," cried the girl, "you really are a coward to say that behind Jolly's back. He never played a dishonest card in his life, and you know it!"

"And every time he went home," continued Rivers, "doggone me if they didn't lead out a fattened calf and skin it for him. There was nothing too much that they could do for him, and they wouldn't sit down and tell him that he was a damn fool, because they might hurt poor Jolly's feelings, and how much better it was for Jolly to go right straight to hell than to have him see that though he was traveling fast, he was going down hill, every lick of the way! So Jolly kept getting broker and broker, and it's been about five years since anybody but his old man would lend him any money. Jolly was pretty expensive for his pa. Old man Delmar had to sell the southeast quarter section, and Jolly took another whole year to run through that—"

"It isn't true," cried Maizie, "but poor dear Jolly wanted to work out a scheme for—"

"For milking tourists and suckers, and it didn't work. So Jolly had to try something else, and he began to sell gold mines on the desert where there was plenty of sand, but no gold. But even that didn't bring in any money, and old man Delmar, he sold off the northeast quarter section, too."

"There isn't a word of truth in that," exclaimed the girl. "You know perfectly well it was that scoundrel Ralph Mills that got Jolly into that game!"

"And," went on Rivers, "things run along like this until about a month ago, when young Jim Purchass,

he found that his girl was forgetting him because Jolly had smiled at her and let her kiss his hand."

"You contemptible creature, Skinny," cried the girl. "Poor old Jolly! If he only knew—"

Philip looked from one of them to the other.

It was much too complicated for him; he only managed to follow the main drift of the narrative and gather that there were two sides to the character of this interesting brother of Maizie.

"Jim Purchass," went on the speaker, "finally asked Jolly to go out for a walk with him. And they rode out together. Jolly says that they got real friendly, and that they soon were exchanging guns and trying snapshots at jack rabbits and what not. But in the middle of the fun, Jim tried a fancy double-roll and shot himself through the heart. And the unlucky thing was that the gun that he shot himself with was Jolly's old forty-four.

"Jolly come in and told the story, and laid down the body of Jim on the steps of the post office, in town, but he didn't dare to take him to the Purchass house, because that Purchass tribe shoot first and ask afterwards.

"However, there was questions asked by others than the Purchass folks, and the sheriff particular wanted to have his say to Jolly. But Jolly thought it would be better to talk later on and get in some mileage first. Because if he stood his trial, mind you, he'd simply be sitting pretty for the Purchass folks to take a few shots at him. And their shots don't miss! You begin to see through the little puzzle, kid? If he stays to

square himself by the law, some Purchass murders him. If he don't stay to clear himself by the law, the Purchass gang and the sheriff together give him a run for his money."

"I begin to understand," said the boy slowly. "I see what a terrible thing it is! And where is Jolly now?"

"Hanging around his pa's house, most of the time, not daring to come too close, because then the Purchass gang, which it's always watching that house, would be apt to spot him, and turn up his toes for him."

He turned to the girl with a gesture.

"Now what, Maizie? You gotta tell the rest of this story. I've come to the end of my chunk of it."

The girl said eagerly: "They watch our house like hawks. There's no law to keep them away from us. There's no real law at all in this country, except what the Purchass people lay down."

"Or the Colonel," suggested Doc.

"The Colonel's too important to bother much robbing the poor people of this neck of the woods," said the girl. "No, the Purchass outfit are the kings here. The sheriff wants to do what he can, but what can he do? Everybody is afraid of the Purchass outfit with their Dormans and their Chisholms, and what-not."

"Is Mr. Dorman one of them?" asked Philip.

"He's nothing but," said the girl. "But anyway, they always have some of their worst men hanging around our place, asking for trouble. If we dared to

try to drive them away, they'd shoot down dad in cold blood!"

"I wonder why they haven't done it before," added Doc Rivers.

"Because our house is the trap where they keep hoping that they'll trap poor Jolly, because they know that he'll always keep trying to come back to us."

"Sure—whenever he gets broke."

"Oh, Doc," cried the girl, "you know that isn't true. He keeps coming back because he loves us, as we love him."

"Ay, ay," admitted Rivers, apparently touched at last with shame. "It's true. Go on, Maizie. What's next?"

"Well, of course Jolly knows that the place is watched, and before he tries to come in to us, he always sends us a signal from one of the hills behind the house—a flash by day with a bit of mirror, or a fire by night. And we got a signal from him not long ago, saying that he expected to come back tomorrow night or tonight."

"Go on, Maizie."

"Well, yesterday morning, instead of one or two of the Purchass outfit, we found four of them hanging around in the woods, and so we pretty well know that they've mastered our code—they know what Jolly sends to us. And they're laying their trap!"

"Why don't you signal back to Jolly that they've got the code?"

"Because we don't know how; we only know that

he's walking down into the trap, and our hands are tied unless—”

Here she paused, and slowly she turned her head until her big eyes rested sadly, hopefully, on the face of Philip.

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE could see that fortune had turned her back on the Delmars. The first sight that Philip had of the place was of the broken back of a barn, lifting above the surrounding trees, and when they drew closer they were surrounded by broken fences and even the cattle in the fields looked thin, humpbacked, cheerless, as though they had not enough heart left to keep at their grazing in the fields.

The house itself seemed snug and comfortable enough; it was larger than the ordinary place, and the wide verandas that circled it seemed to be holding out empty arms for guests who long since had stopped coming. As they came up through the trees, Maizie suddenly called out softly and pointed. In the distance they had the merest glimpse of a horseman disappearing in the woods.

"That's one of them," said Maizie. "That's one of the Purchass men."

Philip, full of his purpose, was about to swing the gray in pursuit, but Doc Rivers called him back.

"You'd just be running into a snag," he assured the boy. "He'd hear you coming, and stand behind a tree and drop you. Or else he'd lead you on where three or four more of 'em would be waiting to clean you up."

No, kid, you stay with me and don't you go nowhere without me!"

Philip reluctantly obeyed.

They came up to the house, circled past it, and left their horses in a barn, and came up to the place, again, by the back way. A tall man of sixty, lean, narrow shouldered, long-armed, came shambling out on the porch and dropped his hands on his hips.

"Hello, Doc," said he. "Have you come over to be a doggone hero?"

"This kid wants trouble," answered Doc, "and I've come over to hold his coat. This here is Philip, Mr. Delmar."

"I'm mighty glad to see you, young man," said Mr. Delmar. "But I dunno that I quite figure what sort of trouble you look for here?"

"I thought—I mean I hoped—" began Philip.

"He's come to help!" said the girl to her father, with fire in her eye. "And if anybody can help us, Phil can. He's just come to help out of the goodness of his heart."

Mr. Delmar made no return to this speech, except to say: "Lunch'll be ready in about five minutes. You boys can wash up, and then we'll set down and feed. George has some chicken hash comin' up and the smell of it has been plumb tantalizin' me for an hour."

He allowed the two men to go to the pump; he followed Maizie into the house.

"He's a grand old man," Doc Rivers assured his companion, as they pumped water alternately for one another, and snorted as they dashed water over their

faces. "Take ten days' ride any direction and you won't meet up with a better man than him. You hear me say it!"

It had a redoubled weight, coming from such a habitual cynic and disbeliever as Doc Rivers, and Philip felt his heart warming. After all, Maizie's father could not help but be an extraordinary man! However, it was certain that Mr. Delmar was a homely fellow, and Philip could not help saying:

"Mrs. Delmar must be a great beauty."

"To make up for the old man, you mean? Mrs. Delmar's dead. She was a lady; her hands wouldn't callous."

With this brief and unsatisfactory answer, he led Philip towards the house, and they entered it with Loafer, as usual, at their heels.

They found the other two about to sit down.

"Where's Harry?" asked Delmar, calling towards the kitchen door, and a negro answered in a high and husky voice: "Ah dunno, Mis' Delmar. I jus' see him sashayin' ovah the hill, a while back."

"Who's Harry?" asked Maizie, instantly suspicious.

"Harry's the new hand," said Delmar.

"What new hand?"

"He come lookin' for a job this mornin' and I took him on."

"Dad!" said the girl.

"Aw, he's straight," said her father. "Judge Lincoln sent him out from town with a note for me. Here's the note: 'Dear Delmar, If you need a good man, take Harry Sheldon. I've seen him work cattle and I know

you could use him. He's more than he seems, and he seems a good cowpuncher.' "

"What does he mean by that?" asked the girl sharply. "What does he mean by saying that he's more than he seems?"

"Wait'll you see him," answered her father. "He's got more hair than would do two gents; he's a dark and dangerous lookin' gent, Maizie, but he's plumb wonderful with a hoss, and he can make a rope work for him!"

"It's a fine time to get a stranger here!" said the girl.

"Honey," answered Mr. Delmar, "if this gent ain't for us, he can't do no harm against us. There's one thing he don't know, and that's one end of a gun from another. There he comes now."

Someone was heard singing in a soft bass voice in the yard behind the house, and presently there appeared in the doorway a small man with a long, pale face, framed in very black hair that almost touched his shoulders.

"I seen a dun cow bogged by the tank over the hill," he explained quietly, "and I just went down and tailed her out."

He went to his place at the table and acknowledged the introduction to Philip with a nod and another nod for Doc Rivers and Maizie. Then he bent his serious attention to his food and ate in utter silence.

"Maizie tells me that she hears you shoot pretty good," said Delmar suddenly.

Philip raised his head, and suddenly it seemed as

though the question must have come from Harry Sheldon, who was sitting just opposite, for the eyes of the new compuncher had turned to black velvet and there was a question behind them. Never had Philip faced such eyes before in man or woman. He looked fixedly at the puncher, and when the latter glanced hastily down to his plate, then Philip was able to answer he hardly knew what. It was as if he had received a shock that left him a little dizzy. He could not explain. He only knew that there was something about little Harry Sheldon that worried him.

After lunch, Delmar took him for a walk up and down in front of the house.

Maizie had told him that Philip was come as a volunteer to help in the fight against the Purchass forces, and Delmar wished, in the first place, to thank their new-found friend. Then he added with a chuckle: "I dunno how far you're a volunteer, and how far you were dragged along by Maizie. She's like that. Her ma was the same before her. Her brother's the same, too. But if I was you, young man, I'd start on the high trail and never stop going for a month."

Philip declared that he could not do that.

"Why not?" asked the rancher. "Shamed to go after coming here? Lemme tell you that it's a lot better to be ashamed and living than proud and dead. Don't you answer me. Just you think it over, and if you don't appear for supper, I'll tell the folks that I sent you to town on an errand. And don't you ever come back from that errand!"

"I don't understand," said Philip, "how any man could leave you in danger. But I understood, Mr.

Delmar, that there is a law which takes care of people in trouble!"

"There's a law," said Delmar at once. "But the law could take more from us than we could take from it. The Purchass clan has us in its pockets. All that we can do is to grin and bear it. But you think over what I been telling you."

They had been walking up and down as they talked, with Loafer, as usual, lurking at the heels of his master, looking very much more as though he were trailing an enemy than following the only thing he loved in the world. Now Delmar broke off to say simply: "What's the matter with your dog, Phil?"

Loafer had left the heels of Philip and started softly for the corner of the house. He stalked crouched low, his belly almost dragging on the ground, and old Delmar whispered: "He's spotted something close, Philip. Let's foller him up!"

Follow him they did, stepping as lightly as they could, when around the corner in front of them came little Harry Sheldon, in the act of lighting a cigarette. Loafer rose from his crouch with a blood-curdling snarl and leaped straight at the throat of the little man.

He struck Sheldon fairly on the breast; but the loud cry of Philip was in his ears and he did not drive his teeth home. Sheldon was rolled head over heels in the dust, and lay on his face, the wolf-dog standing with one forepaw on the back of the fallen man and one raised, while he looked to his master eagerly for instructions.

Philip called him away, and with a cut of a switch sent him scampering off into the woods.

"He won't come back for a whole day," said Philip.

Then he hurried on to help brush the dust from Sheldon's clothes as the latter stood up.

The little man was greatly shaken. He did not wait to dust his clothes thoroughly but went with an almost staggering step to the veranda, and there he sank down, his back against a pillar, and his eyes closed. He was white, and looked a very sick man, indeed.

"I seen the flash of his teeth; I thought my throat was tore to the backbone," said Sheldon, when Philip sat down beside him and offered commiserations.

Then he added: "It ain't nothin'. Only," he exclaimed, opening his eyes, which flashed with a terrible light, "if I ever have a chance at him, I'll shoot him in two, sure as hell."

"I wouldn't do that," said Philip slowly, and rising. "I really wouldn't do that."

"Of course not," answered Sheldon, smiling instantly. "Of course I wouldn't. I just lost my temper for a minute."

He stood up, presently, and went away, but still it seemed to Philip that the little man walked with a trailing, uneasy step.

"Son," said Delmar, "you never oughto keep a dog like that. He'll murder a man one day for you."

"I can't understand," sighed Philip. "He never acted that way before. Was Mr. Sheldon spying on us?"

"Him?" cried the rancher, startled. "I never thought of that!"

CHAPTER XIX

PHILIP, however, changed his mind at once. "Of course he wasn't spying," he suggested. "Otherwise, he would have been afraid to walk straight out at us like that—lighting a cigarette."

"I dunno—I dunno," murmured the rancher. "But he can't handle a gun. The Purchass folks wouldn't have a man around them if he couldn't handle a gun. But we'll just keep an eye on him, son. Now about what I was saying. Will you cut loose from this? You're too young to be burned up with the rest of us!"

"I'll go," said Philip, "when your daughter tells me to."

Mr. Delmar stood for a moment rigid, his eyes closed.

"Maizie's gunna have things to answer for when the last day comes," said he at last. "Here she comes now, to start trouble!"

It was trouble indeed that she wished to start. She drew them into conclave with Doc Rivers, and they discussed possible ways and means of saving the situation. They could not read the mind of the Purchass crew, but they could guess what Jolly Delmar was doing. He was waiting among the ravines and hills at the base of Mount Ransome, until at a proper time he would attempt to come in to the house. That

proper time, doubtless, would be in the middle of the night. Doc Rivers said what they all thought: that the most feasible plan was for them to scout through those foothills and there attempt to find Jolly. Then they could accompany him towards the house as a guard; or best of all, they could simply warn him that it was practically impossible for him to get to the house at that time, or until the guard had been relaxed. But, as Maizie pointed out, how were they to make such an attempt when they were sure to be under the constant observation of the men who lurked about the house? Doc Rivers unexpectedly suggested a plan. He and young Philip would ride from the place and on the trail back towards his own house. This could hardly be regarded as a suspicious move, and once fairly screened among the trees, they would turn and swing back in broad semicircles, Philip riding to one side and Doc to another. In this manner they could get to the foothills without a large chance of being seen, and when they were in the vicinity from which young Delmar was in the habit of sending in his signals, they could scout around and strive to find him.

This attempt would, however, be made in what was now apt to be the enemy's country. Old Delmar declared that he was certain that the Purchass people had discovered the system of light signals which Jolly used. That was why they knew he was about to attempt a return. That was why they were almost certain to be searching through the hills in an attempt to find Jolly and capture him or kill him, whatever their purpose might be.

However, if either of the two emissaries could find Jolly, they were to give him the warning and urge him to go away for another period. Rivers would be accepted by Jolly as a faithful friend. Philip was equipped with a note from Delmar, which simply said: "This is your friend Philip Pillar" (since a last name had to be coined and Philip could suggest no other). "He brings you a message straight from me. Believe every word that he tells you."

So Doc Rivers' plan was accepted. The horses were saddled again, and the two mounted. Maizie stood close to Philip as he swung awkwardly into the saddle, and she rested her hand against the iron shoulder of the mustang.

"Doc wants to help," she said. "But he won't succeed. It's on you that everything depends, Phil. Poor Jolly's life—and the happiness of all of us!"

"Leave him be!" called Doc Rivers harshly, though he hardly could have understood what was said. "You got him in the fire. D'you have to throw fuel on it now?"

Riding on towards the road they passed the little blacksmith shop where wagon and harness repairs were effected without the necessity of a trip to town; the shop was filled with curling blue-white smoke, and, with tatters of smoke clinging to him, little Harry Sheldon came out of the door to take a breath of fresh air, and watched the two go by. Once more it seemed to Philip that the eyes of the little man grew larger and turned to dead black velvet. It was like seeing a ghost, and though this was the hot, bright midday, a

shiver ran through him. He felt at once an inexplicable repulsion, and an inexplicable impulse to approach the man.

"Have you noticed anything odd about Mr. Sheldon?" he asked.

"He's little and he's ornery looking," said Doc Rivers. "I dunno that I've noticed anything else. And you don't call punchers 'mister' except you're introducing one of 'em to a girl. You call 'em by one name, first or last. It don't matter much. Me—I'm Doc to you. Savvy?"

Philip nodded. He hardly heard, for his mind was still far behind him, clinging to the memory of those velvet black eyes, like the eyes of a great cat, half-blinded by the sun.

They journeyed straight down the homeward trail for a mile. There they drew rein, and as being the older and the conceiver of the enterprise, Doc Rivers gave his final instructions.

Philip was to take the right-hand way, cut around the house at a distance of not less than two miles, and then follow up a winding cañon road which he was sure to discover. This would bring him into the foothills, and on one of three of these hills there was a great chance that they would find Jolly. The latter had already been described. He was tall, straight, rode very gracefully and erect, and was a very blond youth. He was also mounted, when he was last at the house, on a strong but ugly black gelding nearly sixteen hands in height and with quarters strong enough to drag a plough.

"Now listen to me," said Doc, "and don't you think that I'm kidding you. You take your spin through those hills, and come up to every sky line like there was a dragon lyin' behind it. Keep ready to drop off your hoss; have your rifle in your hand, and your finger on the trigger, and if you shoot, shoot to kill."

At the mere thought, Doc himself grew pale and grasped the butt of his rifle, where it thrust up from the holster that ran down the saddle beneath his right knee.

"Because," he explained, "when in doubt, you're always safe in shooting at a Purchass. There ain't a one of them and there never was a one that didn't need hanging. And most of them end up that way, or else they turn up their toes in a barroom, somewhere, with a slug of lead through the head. But play everything safe. No matter what you do, you ain't gunna get yourself famous out of today's work!"

After this he paused a moment and then extended his lean hand, which Philip grasped cordially.

"I like you, kid," said Rivers. "I never liked any gent much better, and I wish to God that you hadn't dragged the two of us into this mess. Here's luck to you. So long, and take care of yourself! You're too good a man to get yourself butchered for Jolly Delmar, or for any ten like him!"

With that, they parted, Philip with a full heart, for the kindness of Rivers showed plainly through his rough manners, and this last speech was an open avowal.

He had left Pillar Mountain feeling, from the

conversation of Oliver Aytoun, that the world was thronged with brave and good men and no villains; but he felt that this opinion could be strongly qualified, now. Each man might have his virtues, but those virtues were apt to be poisoned with great vices. The old tales were right, and the world was half white and half black. Just now, he was entering the darker domain. The very shadows beneath the trees seemed to him to be cast by the power of the Purchasses!

And yet he had to admit to himself that he was happy. The strange eyes of Harry Sheldon had made him oddly nervous; there was nothing in the adventure that lay before him which seemed to Philip comparable in danger with the strange sense of fear which he had taken from the new compuncher on the Delmar place.

He scouted through a mighty woodland, broken only occasionally by brief stretches of grassland where fire had eaten through the heart of the forest and left a wilderness of standing stumps, now given over to grass, but slowly being reclaimed from the edges by the still-standing veterans of the woods. He pushed the gray along briskly, for he had several miles to cover, and the going was rough, without a trail to guide him.

So he came, at length, to the desired locality. It was well after midafternoon; the shadows were beginning to stretch out. Indeed, except for an hour or two in the middle of the day, there is always a suggestion, a foreshadowing or a lingering hint of the night in the hollows, the gorges, the sharp-edged valleys

among the mountains. It is truly the land of twilight.

Into the heart of that region he did not have to penetrate, but only among certain hills—such as would have been termed lofty mountains in Scotland, let us say—and searching among these he would find his man if he could.

He obeyed the instructions of Doc Rivers carefully, not so much through fear as because he wished to win from this work not glory, perhaps, but a single smile from Maizie Delmar. He came up towards each sky line with consummate caution, and before each descent, he scanned every covert within eye range and studied it cautiously. A dozen times during that search, his rifle leaped to the shoulder—but in every case it was not the glint of steel that he had seen but the silver flash of poplar leaves, turning like winking metal in the wind.

Over the ups and downs of the first hill he had gone, therefore, and near the top of the second he paused and stared down to the west. The house of Delmar was clearly to be seen, half lost in trees, to be sure, and looking small with distance, but not at all beyond the range of signals that could be studied through a glass.

From this hill, no doubt, Jolly Delmar was apt to send down his signals by fire in the night; and Philip thought of the strained, anxious face of Maizie as she stared up towards that height in the evening of the day, never knowing what words would be sent down

to her, or if the dark outline of the hill would remain blank.

After this thoughtful pause, Philip went on to the ridge; but the first thing that he saw, as he looked down from the height, was a pair of men lying sprawled in a shallow nest of rocks, with rifles beside them, and gunbelts laid out on the ground within easy reaching distance.

He did not need glasses to understand that these were the Chisholm brothers; he did not need an interpreter to guess that they were not lying there merely to rest. For from their observation post they clearly commanded the whole rough and ragged valley which ran between this valley and the next—the natural chute which led down from the upper mountains to the house of Delmar.

CHAPTER XX

HE knew that he could shoot both those men through the back as they lay there; he also knew that nothing could induce him to perform such an act of brutality. Therefore it only remained to him to avoid the pair if he could. Reach the third hill past them he could not unless he made a lengthy detour.

He hesitated for some time, uncertain as to whether he should go down to the lower ground and turn up from that side to the third of the hills, or take the higher way round, working across the ragged face of the mountain.

He determined to make the second move, shaking his head in doubt and uncertainty. For it seemed to Philip a half-dastardly thing to permit those two to remain in their post of watch while poor Doc Rivers rode, perhaps, straight under their rifles!

However, having made up his mind, he dismounted, that his horse, having less weight to carry, might be less liable to make noise, and so he retraced his way with the greatest caution, weaving down the hillside and gradually edging to the left and the mountain-side.

A dozen times he paused and glanced behind him, but there was no sound or sight to show of surveillance, and so he came to the bottom of the hollow.

He worked from this straight up the next slope to the east, and soon he was weaving among the trees which angled sharply on the mountainside, until he came to a fairly level shoulder, or weather-trenched indentation. There he paused. He had made this entire trip on foot, his horse stumbling behind him, and Loafer scouting skilfully in front. But at this point the wolf-dog halted, bracing back on his legs, his head thrown stiffly to the right. There was danger, to Loafer's manner of thinking, in the vicinity, and Philip threw his rifle across the fork of his left arm, ready to strike back if he should see occasion.

The only answer, for a moment, was a distant, dreary howling, as the wind swept through some far-off chasm of the mountains; but then, just behind him, a sharp voice broke on his ear:

"You, there, now stick up your hands and do it damn pronto."

Philip hesitated. There was a great deal of crisp meaning in the tones of the speaker, and yet there was Maizie in the background of his mind; Maizie expected no meek surrender.

"You fool," said the other in anger, "drop that gun and stick up your hands or I'll send you to hell. D'you think I'm bluffing? Act quick, before that dog starts for me!"

Loafer had whirled towards the voice and now was stealing forward towards the danger.

With all his heart Philip prayed for some inspiration which might teach him how to extricate himself from this menace, but he received no thought from heaven.

Slowly he lowered his rifle, and then dropped it to the ground, breaking the force of its fall by catching it with his toe.

"Loafer!" he called.

The dog flashed back before him, and stood there, braced, his magnificent mane rising, very ready to lay down his life for his master. But Philip simply raised his hands above his head and waited, half expecting that a bullet would tear through his back.

"That'll do, I guess," said the stranger. "Now just unbuckle your gun belt, will you?"

It was done. The hands were raised once more as the gun belt thudded heavily on the rocks.

"So!" said the stranger. "Face around here and lemme have another look at you, old son!"

Philip turned, and found himself looking at a handsome fellow of thirty or a little less, extraordinarily pale for a Western mountaineer.

He kept his rifle not at the shoulder, but at the ready, like a man who has the greatest confidence in himself.

"You're one of the sneaks they've hired, are you?" asked the stranger.

"Who?" asked Philip.

"My God," groaned the other, "you ain't gunna try to lie out of it, are you? I've watched some of the rest sliding around through the rocks like snakes hunting for bird's nests. But I'll be damned if ever I saw a poorer excuse at trailin' than you! Who are you?"

"I am Philip," said the boy.

"That's all, eh?"

"Yes."

"Philip Purchass?"

That query opened the eyes of Philip suddenly.

"Purchass?" he asked sharply. "Are the Purchass clan your enemies?"

"That surprises you, I reckon," sneered the stranger.

Philip smiled.

"I think I know you," he said. "You're Jolly Delmar."

"It's a grand guess," sneered the other.

"You are he?"

"I am, kid. Now what?"

"I have a note for you," broke in Philip, and handed Jolly the letter which old Delmar had written. Jolly glanced through it with a curious frown, and when he had finished, he did not seem particularly pleased. He merely crumpled the paper and dropped it into his coat pocket.

"How do I know it ain't a frame?" he asked.

"A frame?" said Philip. "I don't understand!"

Jolly regarded him with a deliberate stare. "You dunno what a frame is? Where was you raised?"

"On Pillar Mountain."

"Yonder? The hell you were! And what dragged you into this mix-up of mine? My father ain't got the money to hire extra hands."

"Your sister—" began Philip, when Jolly broke in with a groan of disgust.

"You're one of her men, are you?" he inquired with a grunt. "Well, Maizie's taking them young! Only," he added sharply, "I want to know what made you

sashay up here among the rocks? What made you guess that I'd be here? None of the others showed that much sense!"

"I didn't know you were here," admitted Philip. "But my way was blocked down yonder. I saw the two Chisholm brothers lying on a ledge under the top of the hill, and I judged I couldn't go that way unless I killed the two of them."

"And what kept you from that?"

"Of course one can't shoot a man from behind," said Philip, opening his blue eyes.

Jolly Delmar sighed.

"You better sit down here. Go get your guns, first. Then tell me what's what."

So Philip picked up his fallen guns and sat down beside Jolly. The latter had chosen a skillful position. Above his head the rocky brow of the mountain arched out and shut him away from observation from that direction. Before him was a semicircle of brush and rocks which concealed perfectly him and his horse. And from this point of vantage, Philip looked through crevices and interstices of the shrubbery across a vast sweep of mountains and ravines, all pouring down into the broader valley. And in the center of the valley, surrounded by the farmlands, he could see the town, now. A brownish mist of dust half obscured it, and heat waves, from time to time, danced it quite out of sight, but at moments he had a view of it, dim with distance and the dusty air. He felt, in that moment, as though Fate were taking direct hand in his life, shutting him away from the little city

with a sort of personal malice. Here he was back among the heights again, and enlisted in a service which well might see the end of him before many days.

He told briefly the message which had been committed to him. Jolly's signal of the other night had been spotted, apparently, by the Purchass men. At least, they were showing themselves in force around the farmhouse, and certainly the presence of the Chisholms was proof that they were watching the signal hills. Jolly was strongly advised to keep away. An attempt to reach the house would be suicide at the present time.

Jolly listened to this with half-closed eyes and a faint smile. Plainly, he enjoyed the situation.

"Dad wants me to keep away. The Purchass crew want me to come in. I hate to please them, but I got to get to the house. I got to get there!"

The smile left his lips. He stared earnestly before him, and Philip was respectfully silent. He was fascinated, to begin with, by the extraordinarily close resemblance between this man and Maizie Delmar; except that he felt in Maizie a greater self-control, a quieter strength. There was a reckless carelessness about this fellow, like the carelessness of a gambler who lays his bets without system, defying chance.

"I got to get in," he repeated at last. "And the Purchass boys expect me tonight?"

"You signaled that."

"If I wait till tomorrow, they might be off guard a little."

Philip remembered the man he had seen disappear-

ing in the woods near the Delmar home; he remembered the burly backs of the two Chisholms as he had seen them lying beneath him on the mountainside, and he shook his head.

"You don't think so?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll work out a plan," murmured Jolly, and began to walk rapidly up and down, pausing from time to time as some sort of a thought struck him. Philip, in the meantime, straining his eyes west and south, saw the roof of the Delmar house in the distance, barely distinguishable above a tuft of trees.

"Suppose that you signal from here," he suggested.

"The folks never could see the fire unless they stood on the roof, and they won't be there."

"The Purchass men won't know that," suggested Philip.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"They'll think that your father is watching from the roof. You send a signal that you'll come in tomorrow night. Can you do that?"

"By simply letting the fire burn, that's all."

"The Purchass people will see that. They'll prepare themselves for tomorrow night."

"And then?"

"Then you slip through tonight. There might be half a chance."

CHAPTER XXI

THEY considered that plan with the greatest care. There was much to be said against it. Philip himself thought it madness for Jolly to attempt to break through the enemy when the latter were in such numbers, but Jolly was determined. Some particular pressure urged him on, and he told Philip that within two days at the latest he must be in the house of his father.

On that point he grew excited.

"I've been the black sheep, kid," he told Philip. "I'm the one that has wasted the money. Well, I'm going to pay up. I'm going to pay up the last penny, old son. I'm going to make Dad's head swim. Maizie is gunna faint. And as for the gang of knockers and yellow dogs that have barked at me all these years—I'll make them eat dirt!"

So said Jolly in a tone between passion and enthusiastic resolve. Philip, hearing, believed that there must be some great and mysterious thing in progress; what it was, he could not tell, but it was an accomplishment now in the hands of Jolly that would re-establish him beyond all the tongues of cavil or rancor.

They waited until the dusk had thickened; in the meantime, laying their plans with care. Two things would be apt to happen. In the first place, when the

Purchass agents saw the signal flame they would be apt to make a movement towards it in the hope of bagging their man at once. Failing of this, in the second place they would probably pay less attention on the rest of this night and far more on the next evening. In the meantime, as soon as the fire was lighted, they were to push down the slope of the mountain, leading their horses. In the valley bottom beneath, they were to attempt an expedient which had come into the mind of Philip as he sat in the blue of the evening and looked down at the rising shadows and the three hilltops like three islands breaking from the soft, thin surface of the evening colors.

The horse of Jolly had been bred and raised on the farm of his father, and he was a sure "return horse." That is to say, loosed anywhere within a reasonable radius, he would drive directly towards the house and come to it in the straightest possible line. A word from Jolly had given the mustang that character, and that word had given Philip his thought: which was that they should come opposite the gap between the second and third of the hills and there loose the black, after lashing some sort of dummy on him, which might look like a rider. The horse would drive straight on towards the ranchhouse and if there were danger on either side, guns would soon begin to pop. If no guns were heard, then they could follow straight on at the heels of the gelding; but if they heard an alarm, they would sheer away to the side and take the next gully that pointed towards the house, hoping that the alarm

in the central ravine, in the meantime, would have drawn all the rest of the watchers in that direction.

Jolly considered this plan with care. He pronounced it too complicated; but the idea of the dummy rider delighted him hugely and he determined that the thing must be attempted. Therefore they spent some time during the afternoon in stuffing Jolly's coat, and then in tying Philip's hat securely upon its head. Through the quantity of twigs and dead grass which filled out the coat, they thrust the upper section of a forked branch; the two lower divisions, like legs, straddled the saddle and could be lashed firmly beneath the belly of the gelding. In this manner it would keep upright, no matter how many bullets were poured into it. And Jolly declared that such a stratagem, childishly simple as it was, would be worth dying for, so much scorn and mirth would be poured out on the heads of the Purchass men if they spotted the flying image and tried to down it.

After the dummy was equipped, they brought together a quantity of wet moss and mixed this with dead grass. This fuel they heaped conveniently at the side and under a good pile of brushwood, which was for the signal flame, and when the dusk was thick, Philip started down the mountain with both the horses, and the other lingered behind to light the grass and moss. This would smoulder for some time, and before it burst into a flame, they both hoped to be in the hollow of the gorge beneath, ready to attempt the second step of their scheme.

Philip was more than halfway down the slope before Jolly regained him, panting.

"It's going well—everything's going well—you've brought me luck, kid!" murmured Jolly. "Nothing can stop me! I feel in my bones that we're going to get back to the house. And it'll be owing to you, if I make it. And if I make it—I'll bust things wide open! I'll bust them wide open!"

He laughed joyously.

"I'll be the making of you, too, Phil. I'll set you up. What do you want? A ranch? You'll have it! A damn fine bunch of saddle hosses? You'll have those, too! A good stock of high bred cows? You'll have the best, and I'll pay for it all. I never was a believer in doing things in a small way. A friend is a damn sight better than gold, and you're proving yourself a friend, old fellow! There's Skinny, too. God knows whatever made him come out and risk his neck for me. Of course he didn't find me. Couldn't expect Skinny to do anything well. But anyway—we gotta remember that he tried. Well, I'll set up Skinny, too. I'll make a man of him!"

He bubbled on in this light-hearted manner, his voice stopping with a muffled gasp of alarm, now and again, when the shod hoof of a horse grated noisily on a rock, or started a small avalanche rolling before them. But they came down safely to the bottom of the slope, going out along a little gully which was filled with enormous trees whose lofty heads made it utter midnight beneath. They had to fumble their

way, Jolly going first and Philip following him, until they saw the trees thin before them.

On the verge of the grove, with the blue of the twilight thick before them, Philip saw his leader halt; then he was caught by the hand of Jolly, and heard the soft whisper of the other: "Stand fast. Catch the nose of your hoss that it don't get a chance to neigh. There's someone coming up the valley!"

A moment later Philip heard the click of hoofs passing over rocks, and next the murmur of voices which momentarily grew more distinct. One of those voices raised into a sudden sharp cry.

"There goes the signal. He's up there now, the rat. Come along, Jack. We'll head in here and go up the mountain. Chuck the reins and leave the hosses! We can make better time on foot!"

"I got a thousand-dollar hoss, here," answered Jack. "It ain't likely that I'll chuck it for a chance like this. He'll be gone before we get there."

"The hell he will. He don't even know that we're around here, He'll use that fire for his camp, too! He's a careless fool. To hell with the hosses. The old man'll make us rich if we can bring Jolly into camp!"

This seemed to persuade the other. Philip distinctly heard the creak of stirrup leathers as two men dismounted. Then the jingling of spurs as they hurried away.

The footsteps died out, and then the two in covert came forth.

They found a pair of tall animals, already beginning to graze, trailing their reins.

"This is nothing but luck," said Jolly, laughing again, but this time through his teeth. "There ain't nothing but luck for us, tonight. Kid, here's my hoss to take the place of the black. Come along, Jerico!" For that was the name of the gelding.

It was decided that since both the horses they had found were of the first quality, they would borrow them for the night and leave the down-headed gray in their place. So the saddles were swiftly shifted, and then they went on down the valley to gain their desired post at the mouth of the valley between the two hills.

As they went, they could see the beacon which they had kindled beginning to leap to its full height, sending a brighter and a brighter eye glancing across the deepening night.

"There's a thousand of them!" guessed Jolly. "They've turned out for me, tonight. But damn them, you and me can beat them all!"

He added again, for his spirits had risen so high that he could not keep his tongue still: "They know that I'm worth the game. They know that I'm worth hiring a whole army to catch! All the better fun beating them. I wouldn't miss this dodge for nothing!"

They reached the mouth of the desired gorge without seeing or hearing another man or horse. It was the same narrow valley over which the Chisholm brothers had been keeping such careful guard that same day, and here they advanced the black gelding and set him

going with a cut of a whip. Away he went, scattering rocks noisily, but presently fell back from a run to a mild canter and so rocked on down the narrow valley.

He had not gone two hundred yards before the trouble began. The two who watched and waited, tense on their horses, heard a voice cry out a challenge, and then a gun barked, sending broken echoes up and down the gorge. Other guns joined in. And Philip and his companion hurried in to turn the flank of the hill and try the next valley, hoping that this alarm might have drawn in the other guards set against Jolly's return.

It was a twisting course which they had to ride in the darkness, with the horses guiding themselves, and picking out a way among sharp-edged boulders or trees that loomed suddenly before them. They were well into the narrow pass as they heard the noise of the guns in the other gorge die out, and Jolly called anxiously: "What is it, kid? Have they killed the hoss or lost it?"

Philip dared not venture a guess, and they began to urge the horses a little more freely. So, twisting around an elbow turn Philip, in the lead for the moment, crashed straight into three riders coming in the opposite direction.

"Purchass?" called one of the three eagerly.

"Purchass," answered Philip, his heart in his throat.

"Purchass be damned," came the rough answer.

"You don't sound like one of the boys. Chuck, throw a light on this gent, will you? There's something loose, here!"

Philip sat his saddle like one entranced, with his impatient horse beginning to gather rein against his hand. He saw one of the three strike a match; in another moment the cupped light would fall on his face. Already, at the first flash of the match, he had seen the gleam of rifles in the hands of the first two.

CHAPTER XXII

HE did what the cornered rat does. With no real hope left, he flung himself straight forward into the path of danger. The reins he abandoned, trusting solely to the grip of his knees which sank through the hard leather of the saddle flaps as though it had been cloth. And driving his heels into the tender flanks of the horse, he made it spring forward like a frightened cat.

He who sat nearest in front fired. It should have been a kill in any other time, but the match light had just flared from blue to yellow, and the whole party was dimly washed across with strange shadows. So there was merely a jet of flame almost in Philip's face, and a bullet passed his cheek as his horse darted in. He caught the rifleman with his right arm; in the confusion of his mind, he could think of no other way of checking the fire. But with all his might he met the shock as his horse tore on, and the rider was torn from his saddle and lay writhing and cursing in Philip's arms.

The last of the party, he who had lighted the match, had dropped it and snatched a gun. With that revolver, he now opened fire. The first bullet struck Philip's burden with a shock which Philip himself felt

distinctly. There was a wild scream of pain and despair; and with the rush of the horse to help him, Philip raised that groaning body and drove it fairly against horseman number three.

As effectually as though a thunderbolt had struck him, that warrior was knocked from his saddle; a yell of rage and surprise mingled with the shriek of the first victim—and there lay the open trail before him.

He grappled the reins and drew back his frightened mount but Jolly shot instantly past him.

"They're all down; ride like hell!" he called as he went by.

And, looking back, Philip could make out three riderless horses milling, and yonder the shadow of a man arising from the ground and pouring out tremendous curses. The other two lay still and groaned.

That was enough. The pass lay smoother before him, now, and he gave his horse the rein and let it fly in pursuit of Jolly. The next moment they were in an open wood, Jolly a scant distance ahead, and the dim trunks shooting past with startling velocity. And presently Delmar drew up, jogging his horse easily.

"Easy to the edge of the woods," he said to Philip. "And then from the edge we'll bolt for the barn. They can't hit us going the pace we'll be traveling, and in this light. They can't hit us except by damned luck, and luck they ain't gunna have. No luck for nobody except us, old son! No luck for nobody except us!"

He seemed in a pure frenzy of joy, and drawing his horse to the side of that which Philip was riding,

he grasped the arm of the boy and worked his fingers into the great, rubbery muscles.

"I see why they sent you. My God, I thought it was a chunk of lightning going ahead of me. I thought it was a cannon ball knocking a lane through those fellows. And I see how you done it. I *feel* how you done it!"

He gave another squeeze to the thick arm of Philip.

"I'll never forget, Phil," he vowed. "I'll remember you in the middle of hell. You planned this thing, and you pushed it through. A kid like you has made old Purchass and all his cuthroats a lot of fools. But I tell you, kid, this here is a golden night for you! More gold than there is in the sun!"

He broke off his strange and exultant speech, laughing again in a savage delight.

But Philip hardly heard the words. What Jolly said was all very well, but what was important was the word that Maizie might speak at the end of the trail, if he lived that long. And with his eyes half closed, smiling, tense, Philip waited for that rich moment.

They drifted on through the woods at ease. Every inch of this ground was known to Jolly, now, and he guided them perfectly. So they came to the verge of the woods, and it was like passing from dark to dawn, so much brighter was the starlit landscape outside the shadows.

To the left, and a quarter of a mile away—no more—they saw two lights from the Delmar house, and nearer at hand was the looming shadow of the barns.

"Fast, kid, ride fast and hard!" said Jolly. "Aim

for the right corner of the barn. Keep low in the saddle. I think we're gunna collect a few bullets on our way!"

Then he started like an arrow and drove his horse, grunting with pain as the spurs went home, frantically across the open. Philip followed, at a much milder pace, with his horse coming up against the bit of its own volition. But they had better luck than even Jolly had expected, for there was not a single bullet fired at them as they crashed around the corner of the barn and brought their sweating horses to a stop at the front of the building.

The shrill voice of old Delmar called from a shadow, somewhere: "Who's that? Answer up sharp, now. I got the pair of you well covered!"

"Dad!" laughed Jolly. "It's me!"

There was a joyous cry in answer, and Philip, taking the horses, led them into the barn, and then busied himself in feeding and watering them. Presently a lantern approached, with the shadows of a man's legs sweeping vastly across the side of the barn. Loafer, as though in fear, crowded back against his master and snarled, with bristling mane.

It was only Harry Sheldon, but as he came closer, Philip had to call out: "Keep back, Sheldon! Loafer is going wild again. I'm sorry."

"That dog is a fool!" exclaimed Sheldon angrily. "Can't you teach him better sense than that?"

"I never saw him act this way before," admitted Philip, troubled. "There's something about you that he doesn't like."

"What?" snapped Sheldon. "What's there about me that he don't like!"

He raised his lantern so that the light, falling in a wider circle, might strike on the dog. So doing, he showed Loafer with eyes of devilish green crouched before his master. But he also showed his own face, and Philip stared at it entranced. For the little man seemed deathly white under the glare of the lantern. There was an odd smile upon his lips, and his eyes were as Philip had seen them before—blank and dead, like black velvet.

"What's there about me that he don't like?" persisted Sheldon. "I tell you, the dog's a fool!"

He apparently had come to help in putting up the horses, but now he turned on his heels, and the shadow of his body fell in a thick dark shaft over Philip and the dog.

At the open sliding door, Sheldon turned again.

"I gotta say just this, kid. If you want that dog to live, you gotta teach him better manners. I ain't gunna put up with it. You hear me talk?"

Then he disappeared, and Philip wondered why it was that he did not feel a hotter anger choking in his throat. Indeed, he felt no anger at all, but only a cold sense of dread.

A voice began to call from the house. He heard his own name. And as he hurried out from the barn, old Delmar came to meet him, reaching out both hands through the starlit night.

"Jolly's told us something of what you've done, my boy," said he. "Maizie was a wise woman to find

you and bring you here. God bless you, my son. I think you've put an end to all of our troubles. Come in with me! We have some things to say to you!"

Philip followed dumbly, but at the door a cold perspiration was on his forehead.

"I don't want to be thanked," he muttered. "It was only a game, Mr. Delmar. You—I—"

The door was jerked open; he was thrust from the veranda into the dining room where Jolly was already seated at the table, with George, the old negro cook, hanging over him in delight.

Maizie, too, was sitting by her brother, poring over him more like a mother, as it seemed to Philip, than a sister.

"I got him. He didn't want to come," crowed old Delmar. "But I got him. He don't want to be thanked. He says it was a game!"

Jolly threw back his head and laughed.

"Sure it was a game—ninepins—for him. One of them for the ball and the rest for the pins, and he rolled a ten strike!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE joy and the kindness of the father and the son were pleasant enough to Philip, but what he had waited for in expectation that made him cold had been the greeting of Maizie, and Maizie simply gave him no attention whatever. Only now and again, in the riotous supper that followed, did Philip find that her eyes were upon him, not in mockery, not in careless mirth like the others, but seriously, gravely reading his face, as though it were filled with interesting and new things. Yet, in a way, that earnest regard meant more to Philip than all the praise and the noise of the other two.

There was only one fly in the ointment, and that was Sheldon. He remained only a short time at the table, and then left. All the time he remained seated there he kept his eyes upon his plate, but as he went out from the room he looked down at Philip, and the latter, glancing up by chance as Loafer growled ominously, saw a pale sneer of mockery and triumph on the lips of the little man.

It seemed to Philip such an important thing that he was about to speak to one of the others of it, after Sheldon had left the room, but he changed his mind. What he objected to could hardly be fitted into words;

there was not a scrap of actual evidence which he could bring to support his feeling that danger to Jolly and the rest was not over and would not be over so long as Sheldon remained in the house.

When Sheldon left, Jolly went to the kitchen door and closed it. Then he gathered his family about him with a mysterious gesture. They drew their chairs close together while Jolly, resting one hand on the table, leaned above them with something of the gay seriousness of a seller of patent medicines.

"Speaking of money, Dad," said Jolly, "how do we stand?"

Mr. Delmar glanced at Philip and hesitated; so that Philip, taking the hint at once, turned a bright pink and stood up.

"Look here," said Jolly. "The kid is one of us. He brought me home! You sit down, Phil. Go ahead, Dad."

Delmar rubbed his lean knuckles across his chin.

"Well, son," he answered, "I'm broke."

"How long have you been broke?" asked Jolly.

"About eight years."

"You mean that you've been borrowing every year from the bank?"

"That's it."

"You, Maizie," went on the son of the family.

"How many new dresses do you have a year?"

"I have enough," said Maizie stoutly.

Jolly smiled upon her. He laid his hand on her head and tilted her face up so that their eyes met fairly.

"Dear old Maizie," said Jolly, and paused a moment, loving her.

"You've been like a poor beggar!" said Jolly. "I know about it. A couple of dresses a year and every dress made over ten times—you sitting up till the morning to do the work! Oh, I know about it!"

He removed his hand and stood straighter.

"I've been the sink into which everything has been running. Is that right?"

"No, no, lad!" said the father. "Don't say that to us."

"I do say it!"

He turned to Philip with his happy smile.

"You're going to get a picture of the sort of a worthless gent that you picked up in the hills and brought home, kid. Everything has gone smash here, because of me."

Philip was silent, listening with all his heart. Since he left Pillar Mountain, filled with hope and vast expectation, he had been forced to admit that the world was by no means the ideal place which fairy tales and romances describe. He had met with brutality, avarice, cunning, treachery, hardness of spirit and heart; but now he felt that he was looking for the first time upon men as they should be. Whatever faults could be laid against the Delmars, at least their attitude to one another was what God himself could have wished to find in the hearts of a family.

"I've been a waster and a lazy hound," went on Jolly. "I know it. But I've never known it so well as I know it tonight. A stranger came out and found

me and took me home. Damn it, Phil, that was a fine thing! But even more wonderful to me was old Doc turning out as he did and coming on the trail."

"I wish he was back," said Delmar, shaking his head.

"He'll come back," answered Maizie. "He's delayed, but he ain't apt to get into trouble. Doc can smell danger miles away."

"If they've harmed him," declared Jolly, "I'll tear them in two!"

Delmar looked at his violent son with widening eyes, as though fully seeing him for the first time. But Philip saw that Maizie had looked down a little. No matter how greatly she loved her brother, it was plain that she saw him clearly.

"Let Doc go for a minute," said old Delmar. "Now go on, Jolly."

"Well," said Jolly, "I was ready to run for it, you understand, after my last rub with the Purchass outfit. I *was* running, and only luck, you might say, would have put the thing in my way. No, it was more than luck. I got to give myself that credit. But I'm askin' you to remember the chunk of ore that old Treggar brought down out of the mountains five years ago."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the father. "Good God!" he added, as he began to understand what Jolly meant.

"But it's true! It's true!" cried Jolly. "I tell you, Maizie, I'm going to dress you up in diamonds and pearls and—"

"Sell me to the highest bidder?" grinned Maizie.

"I'm going to make you roll in gold, dear Dad," said the son, in an ecstasy of love and gratitude. "And I'm going to fix Phil forever. I'm going to turn everything over to you, Dad. You'll have the running of it; I wouldn't trust myself!"

"Go on! Go on!" cried Maizie. "I want to know what happened. You're drivin' us crazy, Jolly!"

"It's nothing to the way you'll be before I finish," Jolly assured her. "If I—"

A heavy foot fell on the rear veranda.

"Who's that?" asked Jolly. "My God, could what I've been saying have been overheard?"

The door that opened on to the veranda from the dining room was cast open, and on the threshold stood Doc Rivers. He leaned against the jamb.

"Well, damn my good for nothin' eyes! You ain't been able to get back! Doggone me if I believe it!" he roared. "I hardly could get back myself!"

He flung himself into a chair, and they could see that great hollows were beneath his eyes, and his face was drawn sharply.

"The mountains is full of men. They're growin' out of the rocks. Fightin' men. They got enough to win the battle of Bull Run. I done the running!" said Doc Rivers.

"Good old Doc!" chuckled Jolly.

"I *am* old," said Rivers. "I'm a doggone old and wore out man, after today. Maizie, where's your manners? Ain't you gunna give me anything to eat?"

"What would you like?" asked Maizie.

"A dry crust'll do me fine," said Rivers. "I could

eat grass. I ain't had a morsel for close onto ten days, I reckon. What've you got?"

"The finest thing you ever heard of."

"You ain't killed the old turkey, Maizie?" cried Rivers.

"Better than that!"

"There ain't anything better than that," said Rivers.

"Only—tell me one thing. Did he get you, Jolly? Did the kid do it?"

"He did nothing but," nodded Jolly.

"He's pretty near half a man," remarked Rivers.

"Now what's the joke about all this?"

"Listen to Jolly," said the girl. "He's better than turkey and roast sweet potatoes."

"He ain't equal to a lamb chop cut thin, to me," declared Rivers. "What *you* got to say for yourself, foolish?"

"Nothing much," answered Jolly. "Just sit quiet a minute. I'm telling the yarn. I was reminding the folks about old Treggar that brought in the ore five year back."

"Him that was gunna buy up Rockefeller and Morgan and hire the Astors to hold his hosses? Him that killed himself with red-eye before the next morning come? What about Treggar?"

"Damn Treggar—"

"He's damned, I guess; by this time he must be damned to a cinder."

"Will you shut up, Doc? Will you let me tell this here story?"

"Go on," said Rivers. "But you got no style, Jolly."

You can dance, Jolly, but you can't talk worth a damn."

Jolly glared at his old friend.

"All right," he said, "I'll cut this here short. The thing of it is that I was always thinking about Treggar and his find. I knew that the mountains had been prospected from top to heel, of course. But I always had the thing in mind, and one day I got to thinking of a place where—well, to cut the thing short, I went up to that place on my last trip out, when I was running from the whole gang of the Purchasses. And, folks, I found it!"

There was a sound like the breathing of wind through thick foliage. Everyone leaned forward, intense and eager. Philip himself felt his blood leap in one great pulse, and Jolly waited, scanning their faces.

Suddenly he said: "I dunno what it'll go to the ton. You people can guess better!"

And he took from his pocket a stone that filled half his hand and tossed it on to the table.

It broke a plate to bits, in its fall, and cracked the water pitcher up the side, but no one paid the slightest attention to these accidents. Delmar himself caught up the rock. It was jet black, but as he turned it, ten thousand bright facets caught the light.

"Ah, Lord love me!" said Delmar. He held the rock in a shaking hand and raised it to the light.

"It'll go—I dunno—thousands and thousands of dollars to the ton! But—Jolly—you don't mean to say that it crops out like this?"

"Do I mean to say that it crops out?" smiled Jolly.

"There's a vein of it a quarter of a mile long lying in plain sight and as thick as the body of a man."

Philip closed his eyes and began to think quickly. Rock as thick as the body of a man, a quarter of a mile in length, of unknown depth, and running thousands of dollars to the ton—why, such wealth was simply incalculable! When he looked up again he saw that the circle had changed. The faces around it were pale, and the eyes glittered.

"Where, Jolly?" asked Rivers in a hard voice.

"That's the question," began Jolly sarcastically.

Then he changed, with an afterthought.

"All right, Doc. You'll know everything, along with the rest of us. My God, if we can't trust you and Phil, then there's no use trying to trust anyone in the world."

And Maizie rather astonished Philip by adding: "That's right, Jolly. That's true."

"Wait till I run up to my room and get that map on the wall," said Jolly. "I can point it out better, that way!"

He hurried from the room, and he left behind him a thick silence.

In the kitchen, they could hear the chink of the dishes and then the rattle of the pans, as the cook washed up after the meal. But in the dining room there was no conversation. They heard the footfalls of Jolly mount the stairs three at a time, heard his door crash, and after that silence began. It lasted for long minutes.

"What's happened?" asked Maizie impatiently.

"He's looking for the map," said the father.

"Map? It's hanging right on the wall!" said Maizie.

They stared at one another with a vague surmise of trouble. Still the silence lasted, and finally Doc Rivers stood up from his chair and grasped the shoulder of Philip.

"Look at that damn dog of yours!" he commanded.

CHAPTER XXIV

A HOUSE was a place of dread to the great wolf-dog. Usually he worked as much of his body as possible under the chair of his master and remained flattened on the floor, his ears pricked, his big amber eyes darting from side to side to follow every sound.

Now, however, he had come to his feet from his place of shelter and he was stalking towards the inner door of the dining room, his mane bristling and his eyes green with a dangerous light.

The people stood up.

"What does it mean?" asked Maizie.

"I never have seen him act that way before," admitted Philip. Then he added: "Except the other day, when Harry Sheldon was coming around the corner of the house."

The wolf-dog, in the meantime, with consummate care stalked towards the door, and coming closer to it, he reached out his paw and strove with the upturned nails to draw it open.

"There's something outside!" said Maizie in a frightened whisper.

Old Delmar reached the door with a soft stride and flung it open. Philip could look straight down the hall from the place where he stood, but he could see nothing; yet Loafer showed the greatest signs of

emotion. He first crouched low, and then with bristling mane, with bared teeth, he shrank back from the empty threshold as though from before some superior and very dangerous foe.

Doc Rivers drew a long and rattling breath.

"My God," he whispered, "there's—there's a ghost—it must of walked into the room. Look at that dog!"

Loafer had regained the feet of his master and against Philip's legs he backed, trembling convulsively, and showing all the signs of an animal desperate with fear, and yet incapable of striking back. To the others it was uncanny; to Philip, who knew the iron nerve and the mighty heart of that dog, the thing was totally unbelievable.

Even his hand on the neck of Loafer did not compose that stiff mane; even his voice did not make the trembling cease.

"Something's in his head," said Philip. "I—I don't know what. I've never seen anything like this."

Then Maizie said hurriedly, "Has anything happened to Jolly? Why doesn't he come? Why doesn't Jolly come? Call him, Dad?"

Delmar called: "Jolly, Jolly!"

There was no answer. The sound went gently echoing through the hall and up the stairs, but not a voice came back to meet it.

Then Maizie leaped into the doorway.

"Jolly!" she screamed. "Jolly, Jolly! Where are you!"

She hung there, clutching the edge of the door; but

still the dreadful silence welled heavily from the dimness of the hallway. Loafer began to growl—not a deep and rumbling sound but a shrill voice, like hysteria of fear.

"I'm—I'm going to go see," said Maizie.

With all his might Philip made the great effort, and finally something snapped in him. He was able to hurry to her and take her arm.

"You stay back here," he said. "I'll go to see Jolly."

He drew a long Colt as he spoke, not through braggadocio, but by instinct of self-defense, for it seemed to Philip, for some uncanny reason, that this was more terrible than any moment he yet had faced. Not the attack of the Chisholms in the barroom nor the wild ride through the pass that same evening had supplied a horror and a danger of such a magnitude as this.

He would have thought that it was all in his own mind, but plainly, from the dog to old Delmar, every living creature in the room felt somewhat the same emotion that filled him.

He made one step into the hallway, and then he heard something more than an echo of his footfall above him.

He hesitated, and down the stairs, slowly, came the form of a man. It turned into the hall. It approached him. Behind him, before his own eyes could distinguish, he heard the girl murmur: "Thank God—it's dear Jolly!"

In an instant he himself could distinguish the son

of the house and he drew back to let him pass. Jolly came on with the same unhurrying stride.

He seemed very unlike one who rushes down with some triumphant information.

"He couldn't find the place on the map and he's trying to spot it in his memory," said Philip to himself. "He's afraid that he'll forget!"

He thought, as Jolly drew into the light, that the face of the young fellow was oddly white and that his eyes were dead and dark, but he had hardly an instant to recognize these features. He heard a violent scratching on the floor; there was a cry of warning from Doc Rivers, and Loafer went past him like a bolt, a half-growl, half-screech issuing from his throat. Philip tackled the big beast with a cry, and struck it down with the weight of his lunge. But it was all he could do to hold Loafer. The dog writhed and struggled with all its might. It had something serpentine in the cunning and the fury and the slipperiness with which it struggled. Once, Philip had it only by one hind leg, and Loafer turned and put his teeth on the arm of his master so hard that the sharp points clove through the cloth and pricked the skin. Yet Loafer did not bite. And again he was mastered by his owner.

Sweating and panting, Philip could straighten at last, for Loafer had pressed himself against the wall and lay with eyes closed, his long tongue thrusting out as he gasped for breath.

All that he saw of Jolly was the back of that young man disappearing through the screen door on to the

porch; and then he was aware that the other three who were in the room were looking more than wildly at one another.

"He didn't say a word, did he?" asked Doc Rivers, in a faint whisper.

"It was the dog," said Maizie in a frightened voice. "It was just that Loafer frightened him—a little—"

"He'll be back in a moment," added old Delmar.

But Philip knew well enough that they were talking only in the vain effort to keep up their courage. They were far from at ease. He himself went back from the doorway into the hall and closed the door after him; Loafer was pressing against him, skulking in the same mortal terror.

Once more the ugly silence began.

Doc Rivers, grown desperate, broke through it.

"We gotta do something," he said.

They all looked at him.

After all, what was there to do.

Again Doc Rivers spoke: "You seen that 'dog before. He liked Jolly as well as he liked anybody. What made him go at Jolly's throat? I ask you that?"

They all winced. Of course they all had had the same thought and it helped not a whit to have the thought put into words. What devil possessed Loafer?

It would have been pleasant to say that the dog was touched by a bit of madness; but there was an uncanny feeling in Philip that the change in the dog had been brought about by the change in the man. What could that change be? What had made Jolly stay so long upstairs? What had made him come down the

stairs, at last, without the map? Why had he walked like a white-faced automaton through their midst?

"Something happened upstairs," said Philip at last. "I'm going up to see."

He resolutely opened the door again into the darkness of the hall; then Loafer came whining and shaking to his feet and seemed to beg him to go no farther. He went on, however, filled with a mortal terror, but forcing himself ahead.

Behind him, he heard the voice of Maizie: "Doc, you go with him. Skinny, if you're a man, don't let Phil go up there alone!"

But there was no answer from Doc Rivers, and certainly no companionable footfall sounded behind him.

He turned on to the stairs and drove himself remorselessly upwards. There was a lamp burning with a small flame at the first landing, and as he approached it, it seemed to him that the flame shrank and changed a bit from yellow to blue; so that he remembered having read of a superstition that flames change color in just this fashion when a spirit approaches them.

He tried to tell himself that this was the rankest folly; but though he could say over the words to his mind, the repetition carried not the slightest conviction.

What would he find there on the floor above?

He remembered suddenly that he did not even know where Jolly's room was, and at that moment he heard a shrill voice—Maizie's voice—calling from below: "Phil! Wait! Wait! I'm coming!"

Then the patter of her feet.

"Keep back!" he managed to say. But it was only a whisper. And then there she was beside him, holding his arm, pressing hard against him. Loafer, too, was trying to shove his muzzle between his legs, and it seemed to Philip that the world was collapsing about him. It had seemed to him that two creatures under the sky were without fear. One of them was Maizie; the other was the great dog; but now both of them were pressing on him in mortal agony of fear.

"I don't want you to go on," said Maizie. "Phil, I want you to come down again. You've done enough. Don't go! For God's sake don't go to Jolly's room!"

The greatness of her terror gave him strength. His voice came to him.

"You go back, Maizie," said he. "There's nothing bad. You go back to your father and Doc."

"Down that stairs—alone?" she shuddered. "I'll stay with you!"

And he turned down the hall with her.

A door gaped at the end of it and he knew, somehow, that that was the door to Jolly's room. The moon was up; a pale shaft of its light was falling through the window into the chamber. What would it show them when they gained the threshold?

He pushed on, gritting his teeth; nothing but a blind speed could carry him over that entrance, so he trusted to the force of motion which brought him a full stride within the chamber before he had to halt.

He looked wildly around him. Nothing was wrong.

Nothing was out of place. There was no sign of confusion. There was only the pale moonshine lying in a pool on the floor and a continual fall of ghostly light dropping through the open window.

CHAPTER XXV

MAIZIE ran suddenly ahead of him. It took his breath to see her venture so. She went straight to the window, and there she leaned low over the floor.

"Look, Phil!" she whispered.

Instantly he was beside her.

There was not much—just a trace of mold or earth, but it was in the plain outline of a man's shoe.

The girl darted to a closet and came back with a shoe which she held above the print.

"You see?" she said in the same dreadful murmur. "It's smaller than Phil's foot. Someone's been here before him! Who was it? Who did Jolly meet here? A Purchass, Phil! But—what did they do to him?"

They stood up and faced each other, staring helplessly, with wide dark eyes.

"We've lost him again," murmured the girl. "Oh, Phil, we've lost him again, and now he'll never come back! They've got him and they'll murder him!"

He would have tried to comfort her, but the same horrible thought was strong in his mind, and no comforting words would come to him. Only, staring at her with wonder, for the first time he felt that she was barely more than a child. She had seemed armed in a complete self-sufficiency; now she was a weak and helpless girl.

Then, most cheerful and matter of fact, they heard the crunching hoofs of a horse biting into the sand and gravel of the back yard and they looked down from the window in time to see Jolly himself mounted in the saddle and riding from the yard the same horse that he and Philip had taken from the Purchasses, and leading another behind him. Philip did not need a second glance to make sure that the led horse, also, had been taken in the same adventure. He recognized the small, well-placed, eager head of the thoroughbred.

"It's Jolly!" murmured Maizie.

She leaned far out from the window.

"Jolly! Jolly!" she called. "Where you goin', dear?"

Jolly did not look up.

It might have been the mere effect of the moonlight, but it seemed to Philip that the face of the youngster was white and set, as it had been when he walked down through the hall and into the dining room.

"Jolly!" screamed Maizie.

But Jolly rode on out of sight around the corner of the house and the horses, reaching the dusty trail, were heard no more.

"What was it? What happened? It *was* Jolly, wasn't it?" she asked Philip, clinging to him.

"It was—I think it was—I don't know," he stammered. "We'd better get back down below."

They came to the door of the room and there the nerve of Loafer gave way with a crash. He bolted ahead of them towards the lamplight that entered softly into the lower hallway. They heard the scratch-

ing of his frantic feet, saw his shadow shoot past them, and Maizie dropped helplessly over the arm of the boy.

In the curve of his left arm he carried her lightly, wondering at her little weight, and lifting her high so that her head would fall on his shoulder, supported there, her cheek against his cheek. In his right hand he carried his drawn revolver, and with a sidling step, to look up and down the stairs at the same moment, lest danger should rush down behind, or leap up in front, he bore her slowly to the lower floor and then into the dining room.

Old Delmar, with a groan, received her, but almost instantly she opened her eyes, calling wildly: "Jolly! Has he come back! Is he here?"

She saw Philip and reached a feeble hand for him.

"Was it a dream, Phil? Did you and I stand at the window upstairs and see him ride away?"

He nodded, and at that she fell back in the chair, her eyes closed.

Philip repeated hastily to Doc Rivers and to Delmar what they had seen—the footprint near the window, obviously much smaller than one made by the shoe of Jolly, and the strange spectacle of Jolly riding away through the moonlight with a white face, deaf to the voices which called to him from above.

"We'll follow him," said Rivers.

Delmar raised his hand.

"Let him be! Let him be!" he said. "I never forced a child of mine an inch. I'll not start now. Let Jolly go. It—it looks to me like he had some-

thing on his conscience. That footprint upstairs—tell me, was it small enough to be the footprint of a woman?”

Doc Rivers groaned with relief.

“That’s all it is?” he exclaimed. “It’s only some girl that’s dropped in on old Jolly and reminded him of something. Something that he took to heart. Thank God—because I thought—I thought—”

He bit his lip.

“Here, Maizie,” he said, “have a drink of water. You look all done up!”

She pushed the proffered glass away. She had recovered from this spell of weakness with wonderful suddenness and now she sat up straight and tall on the edge of the chair, looking feverishly from one of them to the other.

“Something took Jolly away,” she said. “It’s no good following. The thing that could take him away in spite of himself would take him away again. We all felt it—I felt it, I mean. Did the rest of you feel sort of winter in your backbone?”

One and all they blinked in acknowledgment of the justice of that comparison.

They all were silent, no one daring to meet the eye of the other. What Philip was thinking of was the cold outer world, windless, chained up with the white, eternal frost of the moon; and he could guess that the others had the same picture in their eyes, and poor Jolly drawn away through that icy wilderness he himself knew not where!

Loafer came suddenly to him from the corner and

licked his hand. The dog was himself again. The mane had fallen and the green light had left his eyes, and at the same instant Doc Rivers began to roll a cigarette and old Delmar to drum on the table with his finger tips.

It was like the lifting of a spell, and Maizie seemed to feel the change, also.

"It's gone," she said in a calm and natural voice.

"Ay," nodded her father. "It's gone. And Jolly with it."

"What was it?"

"A ghost," said Doc Rivers with grim belief.

"Ghosts don't leave footmarks on the floor," declared the girl. "And—ghosts don't carry Jolly away from his home."

"Carry him away? He went by himself."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm going to have another look at his room," she said.

They all went up in a crowd, Loafer preceding them and turning down the hall above in the correct direction as though he knew perfectly well where they intended to proceed. As they came into the doorway, Loafer already was at the footmark under the window, and sniffing at it, he growled savagely, as only a wolf, one would have said, can growl.

They brought two lamps and flooded the spot with light. There was only the single mark on the floor. Maizie tried her foot beside it, and then looked up significantly, for it was pronouncedly larger than her shoe.

"And I'm no Cinderella," said Maizie, to complete her unspoken thought.

It could well have been the mark of a man's foot, they decided. The stuff which outlined the impression was simply the greenish dust and mold from the shingled roof that sloped down outside the window. In fact, when they held a lamp outside they plainly distinguished three or four places where that same mold had been disturbed, and one was a long scrape, as though the foot of the visitor had slipped.

"If I'd been outside, only, with a gun on him!" groaned Doc Rivers.

But they talked no more about it. Conversation could do no good, and the important matter was: What communication had the stranger given to Jolly Delmar at that hour of the night, in order to make young Delmar leave his home like a stricken man going to his execution? All the manner of Jolly, now that they looked back upon it, had been that of a man going to his death.

Everything about it was strange. It was most unlike Jolly, for instance, to have made such a melodramatic exit, stalking through the dining room in silence while the others gaped at him. Most of all, it was unnatural for him to have made no answer to the voice of his sister when she called to him from his window.

All that was most remarkable. But certainly Jolly was not the one to play a foolish part or take advantage of a singular circumstance to shock his family.

A real calamity had fallen upon him. Of that there was no doubt.

He who had made that footprint on the floor of the room was the person who had brought the shock upon him. That, also, seemed reasonable. But at that point all further conjecture ended.

"Get Sheldon!" said Delmar suddenly. "He's got an eye for a sign. Get him here and let him work out this here trail if he can. Maybe an expert can get something out of it!"

Doc Rivers went to call Sheldon, whose room was further down the hall, but he came back to report that Sheldon was not in his room. Furthermore, no blankets were spread upon his cot.

"Gone, by God!" exclaimed old Delmar.

"He's a small man!" broke in Philip. "He might have made that track!"

"He might!" admitted Delmar. "Though why over the roof when he might of gone down the hall?"

They stared hopelessly at one another.

"That runt," breathed Doc Rivers. "A skinny runt like that Sheldon! What could *he* know? What could *he* say?"

CHAPTER XXVI

JOLLY did not come back the next day and neither did he come the following morning, after which it was agreed in the house of his father that there was very little likelihood that the boy would ever come back. Moreover, no matter how improbable it might appear, everyone of the silent and gloomy people in the Delmar house was convinced that he must have ridden straight off into the arms of the enemy. Otherwise, if he were back in the neighborhood, he would have attempted to send them some signal.

They were convinced of this, but they were also convinced that nothing they could do would be of the slightest avail. It would be frightfully dangerous to scout anywhere near the Purchass house, a gloomy old stronghold among the hills. In short, they needed help, and it was Doc Rivers who proposed what they should do and how they should go about it. They must hunt out the Colonel and have speech with him. The law they could not invite in. If it were used, it might open the Purchass house—at some cost to itself—but if the boy were found, he would be found dead. And if he were found alive, he would simply be transferred to a jail.

All of this they were agreed upon, and Rivers simply

suggested that he and Philip ride at once to the Colonel and beg him to give his assistance.

As for the Colonel's price, since he was an expensive tool to use, he might be convinced by the talk of the mine, and above all by showing him the specimen of ore which Jolly had shown to the family. That specimen they still retained; the father had it under lock and key.

The plan was simple enough. If the ore interested the Colonel—and it was reasonably sure to do so—they might then offer him a share in the mine in case he would secure the liberation of Jolly. If Jolly were dead, the matter ended there. As for the share, the Colonel was to be proffered ten per cent of the profits; if need be, Doc Rivers was to raise the offer to fifty per cent of the total! And they felt it was more apt to be near that figure, for the Colonel was known to drive a shrewd bargain.

Maizie and old Delmar accepted the plan with enthusiasm. They would give up every penny of hope from the mine if they could only secure Jolly again; but it was doubted if even the great power of the Colonel could persuade the Purchass clan to part from their prisoner.

So Philip and Doc took the road at once. Doc Rivers was to be the persuading agent: Philip was the guard in case of danger on the road, for it was highly probable that the Purchass agents would attempt to take bloody revenge for the two whom Philip had hurt, perhaps mortally, in the valley. So they looked to their weapons, and it was while Philip was

cleaning his rifle on the rear veranda of the house that Maizie came out and leaned against a narrow wooden pillar beside him. Loafer, who of late distrusted all strangers, now strode from behind his master and lay down on guard between him and the girl.

Yet she did not speak, so that Philip grew more and more self-conscious. At length, with clumsy hands he let a piece of chamois fall. It fluttered over the edge of the veranda and slumped to the ground.

"Get it, boy!" commanded Philip, and Loafer slipped over the veranda edge and leaped back, the rag in his teeth. At the feet of his master he put down the chamois and then again resumed his watchful position, this time seated, with his great head canted a little to the side.

"He's useful," observed the girl. "How old is he?"

"Uncle Oliver brought him home four years ago when he was a little puppy."

"Hunt with him?"

"He's great at that."

"What?"

"Deer and things."

"Deer?"

"He spots 'em. Then if they're up a pass, say, you can send him around to drive them down to you."

"You gotta hit the deer on the run, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"Humph!" said the girl.

"I suppose you hunt a lot?"

"I get a shot now and then I'm not very good."

"It takes a lot of practice," admitted Philip kindly.

His color was growing more normal; and he wondered what was in her mind, for it was not the habit of Maizie to talk to no purpose.

"I've had practice," said she. "There's one thing I've worked over."

She pointed to a tall pine which stood near the end of the barn.

"You see that squirrel out there among the needles?"

"I see it," said Philip.

"I've tried for him a hundred times with my rifle. I've had the fur out of him, but never the blood."

"He's quick, I guess?"

"He's lightnin'," she assured Philip. "He knows a rifle, too. Don't bother till he sees you put it to your shoulder."

"You might try a revolver, then."

"At that distance?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Oh, nothing," said Maizie with some heat. "Don't you tell me that you can hit a squirrel that far off, with a Colt?"

"Not fanning the gun," corrected Philip. "But like this."

The Colt glided into his hand, swayed up to the level of his eyes, and exploded. The twig on which the squirrel stood was cut in two beneath his feet. He tumbled head over heels, struck the broad branch beneath, and scampered in towards the trunk of the tree, chattering with terror.

"I missed," said Philip, blushing deeply. "I—I'm a little out of practice, I'm afraid!"

The girl looked not at him. She was studying the tree with care.

"That's sixty yards," she said presently.

"It's only a little over fifty, I'm afraid," said Philip.

"Humph," said Maizie.

She turned back to him.

"If that was a man—it wouldn't have hit his head—it would have cut his throat in two!"

"Perhaps."

"Phil!"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever fired a shot at a man?"

"No, thank heaven!"

"Would you hate it?"

"Hate it!"

"But before you're a week older you'll have fired."

"I hope not."

"And the man will die," said Maizie sternly. "Maybe a couple of him will die!"

Philip closed his eyes to shut out the thought.

Maizie went on: "If you don't want to have that kind of trouble—blood on your hands, I mean—you quit this trail. You leave the valley, will you? Go away some other place. Folks will always be glad to have you."

"I don't know very much," confessed Philip.

"You're about the strongest man in the world, and pretty near the straightest shot. D'you know that?"

He shook his head.

"But you're going to ride into a terrible lot of trouble. I gotta tell you that. They're devils. I mean the Purchass lot. They'd kill you with poison, if guns didn't work."

He looked straight before him, seeing this thing in detail, but he would not surrender.

"Where are you traveling?"

"To find work," said Philip. "I must make a home for Uncle Oliver."

"How old is he?"

"He's a good deal more than sixty."

After this, Maizie folded her hands together at her breast and looked past Philip into sadness and thought, so that he dared to stare into her face, and she seemed to him of a more than mortal beauty.

"I'll find Jolly or die on the trail," he told her gravely, feeling the words as he spoke them. And as he spoke, he knew that the determination was turning to iron in him.

She looked suddenly down at him again; Loafer growled softly.

"If ever Jolly comes home," she said, and paused there, but something brilliant in her eyes went on speaking to Philip, and a happy mist rushed over his mind.

Through that mist he dimly heard Doc Rivers calling, and through it he saw the two horses led out from the barn.

Somehow he was mounted; automatically he thrust his rifle into the long holster that dangled down beneath his right leg. He picked up the reins.

"When in doubt, ride hard!" called old Delmar.

The dimness lifted; Philip saw the girl waving to them from the veranda; and he told himself that he would live up to his promise or pay the price which he had vowed to her. She had not finished speaking out the promise, but he felt that she knew and that he knew what had been meant.

Suddenly the trotting horse jerked him past a string of trees. The narrow trunks blurred the sight of the veranda, and the waving girl, and old Delmar standing beside her. And just before they disappeared Philip thought he saw her turn to her father, sagging like the weariest of all creatures, and so fall into his arms. But it was only a flash. Then he was on the open trail, and Doc Rivers was regarding him with a thin, withered, sardonic face.

"Good old Phil!" he said, half sneering. "You sure are the champion simp!"

Philip shrugged his shoulders. He did not understand. He did not want to understand.

"I'll tell you something," said Doc Rivers. "She's a lottery. That's all. You got ticket number seventeen thousand four hundred and ninety-three. That's all. Write it down in your head. I'm telling you straight! And now, for God's sake, get that dizzy look out of your face. We gotta have both of our pairs of eyes open on this trip."

CHAPTER XXVII

THEY dropped rapidly through the hills. Philip's eyes were wide open, indeed, for anger had roused him, and he had checked himself on the verge of making a threatening retort to his companion.

They were riding down a narrow valley, from tall hills to low, with the prospect opening before them to the east. To the west a high fog was gathering, so that the tops of the mountains floated above it blue and light, like queer-shaped ships floating upon the heavier sea. The forest, ruined in that mist, tangled together for a few hundred yards, and then went out altogether in a massive wall of gray. But to the east there was not a suspicion of moisture in the air. All was bright and crisp, and cool with the autumn chill.

Doc Rivers announced that he would be well pleased to leave the verge of the trees, but as he also said, they might as well accept a small danger in the beginning, since they were likely to have far greater perils before the end.

"But," said Philip, speaking suddenly out of the midst of his thoughts, "you tell me that the Purchass people are terribly strong?"

"Strong? Like iron!"

"Then how could one man like the Colonel do as he pleased with them?"

"I dunno that he can," replied Doc Rivers. "But the Colonel never has failed, people say!"

"Failed to do what?" asked Philip.

"He's never failed to make a stack of money every year of his life since he came out here; he's never failed to keep out of jail; and he's never failed to handle his job. That's a good deal to win out in!"

"It is!" admitted Philip gravely.

"The point about the big Colonel is that he never takes a crack at the law. He leaves it be. That's where he's got the sense."

"Then how does he make his money?"

"Out of the crooks. Suppose that you're a ranchman. You gotta pretty good ranch, a doggone fine layout of cows. But those cows begin to drift. Well, you send for the Colonel. He says ten thousand dollars. You pay. The cow stealing stops. There ain't a cow rustled on your place, ever after that!"

"Does he stay on the place and guard it?"

"He don't have to, no more. At first he had to do some things. The Yerkes boys and their gang, he run into them, first. They told him to go to hell. He wasn't even an officer of the law. Well, he run them right up into the hills. He killed three of 'em. He wounded five more. He captured four men, tied 'em together, and he drove 'em down from the mountains barefoot. One of 'em died afterwards. One of 'em lost a foot from walking through the snow. And the other two, there wasn't enough manhood left in 'em to make up a boy between the pair. That broke up the Yerkes gang. I mean, it wiped it out! After

that, people took the Colonel pretty serious. Personal, I'd rather have a chunk of hell after me than him!"

"I understand," said Philip, his eyes gleaming. "It seems a very good thing to me. He's a sort of independent officer of the law."

"He ain't. He's hired hell-fire. That's what he is! Law? He don't give a damn for the law. It's trouble that he lives for the sake of. Oh, he's a man! Look at Thomason. He had this part of the country staked off for himself. Every year he worked one bank robbery. Then Grier comes in. He begins to raid the banks right and left. He robbed four in three months. Thomason went to the Colonel. The Colonel went out and brought Grier in, tied to his saddle like a dead deer, you might say. Grier just lived long enough to confess that he was a yegg. They say that Thomason paid the Colonel twenty thousand dollars for that job."

"But I should think that it would keep down crime a great deal," suggested Philip.

"You would think that, but you don't understand. The Colonel don't go ravin' after criminals. He gives out a sort of a charter. Suppose that you want to come into the county and work some jobs in a big way—selling stock in mines that ain't, boosting the stock of railroads that never get down to tracks. Well, if you want to do that, you go to the Colonel. You pay him. He lets you go. He puts a stamp on you, you might say. You're his man. The rest of his men will give you a hand. They'll help you out. Even out of jail. Well, that's worth something. You gotta pay

a price and a damn big one. It's the big money that the Colonel is after. He don't mind the little things!"

"And if the criminal on a big scale doesn't pay?"

"The Colonel goes down and cleans him up."

"How can he do that without getting put in jail?"

"Because he always has all of the evidence. He knows all of the crook world and the crook ways. He can do anything that he wants. Get any information that he wants. I was standing on Main Street and Fourth Avenue, one day. A big gent in long gray whiskers was setting in a runabout jiggering the reins and talking to another gent that had his foot on the hub of the front wheel of the buggy. Up comes big Colonel. He takes the whiskered gent by the neck and lifts him out of the wagon. He takes him down the street and chucks him into the open door of the jail.

"‘Stay there till you’ve been sentenced and sent up,’ says he.

"Well, that gent stayed there. He had to. It was worth his while to stay there, mind you, because if he'd come out, the Colonel would have gone for him with a gun."

"If he could lift a grown man like that—from a high seat—he must be very strong!" suggested Philip.

"He's only six feet six. But you'll see him for yourself. You'll admire to see him, kid!"

He began to laugh, a little savagely, and Philip bowed his head.

After all, bigness of body is not the only important feature to be considered. He was keen with interest.

Other men had been like children. They had broken, their strength had melted away like wax under red hot pincers when he gripped them. But the Colonel, apparently, would be something of a different order, and he was hungry to see the big man.

They were going rapidly towards the town, now; and when they had put a good twelve miles behind them, either at raking canter or rapid trot, they looked from a hilltop into a pleasant little dale where a small cottage stood; and beyond the farther crest, they could see the city lying in the plain, streaked over with wind-bent columns of smoke. The pulse of Philip raced as he looked towards it. Somehow he felt that all of his adventuring consisted of the merest skirmishing upon the borders of things, but the heart of the adventure was still to come, when he reached the town.

"That," said Doc Rivers, "is his place."

"That little house?" asked Philip, in amazement.

"That little house," said the other.

"But see!" said Philip. "There are trees walking up to it on three sides! Any man with enemies—they could slip up on him there!"

"They have," nodded Rivers. "Charlie Hass, he sneaked up by way of the red barn, there. You see? Charlie, he got past the barn. He's buried a little to the right of it, because the Colonel believes in planting where the seed falls. That's his way of putting it.

"He made the grave right there in his back yard. He even put up a headboard. What d'you think that he wrote on the board?"

"Well, of course I can't guess!"

" 'Here died Charlie Hass for want of a better thing to do.' That's the Colonel."

Philip listened in amazement. He could imagine killing in the heat of blood; he could imagine only too keenly a furious and savage joy in the conflict. But he could not imagine one who laughed as he struck.

"Turl McGinnis come up through the west grove, there. He got as far as that birch, you see it? You can just make out the white streak of it! Then the Colonel took him from behind and busted him over his knee."

"His knee?" echoed Philip.

"Busted his back, you see? The sheriff got out in time to see him die and take *his* confession. There you are! It kind of discouraged the boys from trying to sneak up on the Colonel until a terrible red-headed gent comes up from Arizona and swears that he'll get the Colonel, by God, if he has to die for it, because the Colonel had killed his best pal. And Arizona Red, he took to the woods, also, and come in there from the east, and there he's lying low with a fine grassy grave piled up over him, and on his headboard is written: 'Here lies Arizona far from home.' "

"But how does he do it?" asked simple Philip. "Does he have spies who tell him what's happening? Does he keep the woods filled with his men?"

"Kid," said Doc Rivers with a sort of pitying gravity, "don't you think that if I knew what the Colonel knows I wouldn't be nothin' but another Colonel? D'you think that I'm self-contented, maybe,

bein' nothin' but bullied at home by Ma? No, kid, I dunno how the Colonel manages it. Nobody knows how the Colonel manages it. He's got just one gent to take care of him, and that gent is a Chink."

Philip, riding down the hills from the south towards this affluent abode, felt as though he were approaching the den of an ogre, and his eyes danced. It was the first touch of life which matched with what he had left behind him with his books on Pillar Mountain.

They crossed a meadow where several horses grazed, and each of them was a mighty creature of sixteen or seventeen hands, powerful as a draught horse across the quarters, but finished fine and hard at every point.

"They can't carry him uphill," said Doc Rivers, noticing the direction of Philip's glance. "He does the hills on foot. But they can scoot him down the slopes, and they can gallop him over the valleys. He don't ride no ways except the way the wind blows. What the country looks like is nothing to the Colonel!"

They came closer, breaking through a meagre grove of poplars, and then Philip saw a man lying in an invalid's chair, wrapped in a blanket and sleeping in the sun.

"Hush!" said Rivers. "That's him!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

HIS eyes were closed. He was turned well south so that the full might of the sun beat against him, and as Philip and Doc Rivers came closer, dismounting from their horses, they could see that this must have been an old practice with the great man, for his very eyelids were bronzed by the sunlight, and above his eyes the forehead, usually shaded by the wide sombrero, was nut-brown almost to the verge of the hair, where indeed a pale streak occurred.

This was only the first impression of the giant, but a closer inspection showed that he was a book that would take much reading. In every way he was massive. The hand which hung over the arm of the invalid chair looked like a mighty engine of destruction. His pointed beard and elegant mustache could not disguise for a moment the power of his jaw, and upon his brow as he slept was the frown of might.

The giant opened his eyes and regarded them in leisurely fashion and with bright, unwinking eyes which appeared of an almost unreal blue because of the blackness of his hair and beard.

"You're young Rivers, I think," said he. "Forgive me if I don't get up! Li!"

He called loudly, and the woods or the face of the house flung back the booming echo once and again.

The servant did not need to be told what was wanted. He appeared now carrying two chairs, which he placed, with a bow for each guest.

"I'm Rivers," replied Doc as he took a seat, "and here's a friend of mine. Sit down, Phil!"

But Philip first acknowledged this introduction by advancing a step, very frightened, and taking the hand of the giant. It hung loose and cold and moist in his grasp; it did not return the pressure of his handshake, and he returned to his chair depressed and more overawed than before.

"You've come a distance?" asked the giant.

"From the Delmar house," said Rivers, and waited a little.

"That's twelve miles and a half," said the Colonel. "How is everything with the Delmars?"

He had a lazy, luxurious way of speaking. His lips were astonishingly red and looked as though they had been polished; they parted and remained open for a moment, always before a sound came. And at the end, they were still parted, as though something more were about to be uttered.

"The Delmars are well enough, what's left of them," answered Doc Rivers.

"One of them dead?" asked the Colonel.

"Gone," said Doc Rivers.

"The pretty girl has eloped at last?"

"She's still home."

"It's the boy, then. He's been due for trouble for a long time."

"He's been havin' it, too, sir."

It seemed to Philip that Rivers appeared like a child at school in front of the Colonel, so stiffly did he sit in his chair.

Li brought tea and fruit and placed it on a little bamboo table between them, but Philip would not eat. He was too enormously interested in this man out of a fairy tale.

The Colonel pressed them. He pointed out the dark red cheeks of the pears and the rich yellow of ripeness which set it off. He picked up an apple and began to set an example by eating it. He ate with small bites, with very white teeth that seemed, like his lips, to be polished; so did they flash in the sun. And his blue, unwinking eyes flashed above. The sky at clear midnight reminded Philip of those eyes; he could imagine that the sea lying level and windless under the morning sun might be like those eyes. As for the light in them, it was like that which might slip and glide along a fine sword blade exposed for sale and slowly turned.

The eyes of other men were mere windows out of which they peeped, now and again, and through which others might have a glimpse of all that was inside; but the eyes of the Colonel were very different. They were a portion of the bright, blue, terrible soul within him. When he glanced at Philip, it was like the impact of a heavy weight, and the boy was glad that Rivers was occupying most of the attention of the great man. It was very easy to understand how he could run two or three counties, each as big as a New England state. It was only wonderful that he did

not make himself a king in whatever part of the world amused him most.

"Young Delmar has been having his trouble, then?" said the Colonel. "He was out of date; he thought that he lived in the Garden of Eden. What about him? Is that your errand to me?"

"Yes," nodded Rivers. "Jolly's gone. I dunno how. They switched him away after the kid and me brought him in through their lines!"

He said it with a little ring of pride. The Colonel, at this, allowed his great head to roll slowly to one side, so that his attention bore full upon the face of Philip.

"Are you the one who came through the pass and threw the Purchass men about?" he asked.

Philip blinked. This sudden attention raised a lump in his throat around which he could not speak, and Rivers had to say: "That's the man, sir!"

The Colonel began to laugh, softly. He let his eyes close, and his laughter boomed in him as in a cave. Loafer got up and looked the giant in the face and began to growl.

"Hush!" said Philip, and the wolf-dog sat down between his legs.

"Five broken ribs, a broken hip, a dislocated shoulder, and a bullet out of their own guns. That's what makes it beautiful. That's what makes it a lovely affair!"

He drew a breath slowly, as though retasting the pleasure of that sport.

"One only has a few perfect moments in a long

life," he said to Philip. "Treasure this one. Print it deep in your mind. It is better than a volume of poems. Now, Rivers, tell me what you want."

"I want you," said Rivers.

The Colonel merely nodded.

"Jolly's gone; the Purchass people have him; well, we want you to get him back."

"My dear boy," answered the Colonel, "I love the trusting way in which you approach me! But the Purchass lot are the strongest group in the mountains. I'm only a single man, and they're at least thirty effective fighting men, and more if they want to send out for them."

"Yes, sir," said Rivers.

"You know that; but why do you come to me?"

"Because I got this idea—that you and Phil, together, could smash through walls of rocks and beat armies to a pulp."

"He flatters us, eh?" said the Colonel to Philip. "Give me your revolver."

Obediently, Philip laid it in the hand of the giant, and the latter went over it in detail, examining every small point.

"Yes," he said, handing back the gun, "you've learned to shoot very well. Why have I never heard of you before?"

"He's just come into these parts," explained Rivers.

The Colonel closed his eyes again, and Philip was glad of it, for while they were open, he was under a constant strain.

"I don't see what I could do for you, Rivers," he

answered at last. "Admitting that Philip is a fighting man of the first water—of the very first water—still, it only takes two bullets to end two men, and the Purchass tribe have a great plenty of bullets."

"I wanted to talk it all over," said Rivers. "I wanted to offer you something worth while, sir."

"Don't tempt me," answered the Colonel.

He pointed suddenly at Loafer.

"That's a dog," he said.

"Thank you," said Philip.

"He would take off my hand at the wrist, I think."

"He would, sir."

"Will he watch over you at night?"

"He will, sir."

"And guard you?"

"I have to keep him tied up every night."

"Young man, what price have you for that dog?"

The blue eyes of Philip opened enormously wide.

"I don't understand," said he.

"You speak English, I hope?" asked the giant. "I say, will you sell that dog?"

"He wouldn't stay with you," declared Philip. "He'd run away."

"Nothing runs away from me," replied the Colonel severely. "He would stay if I cared to keep him. Now, my lad, what's your price?"

Philip shook his head. He reached out a sudden hand and at the touch of it Loafer turned his head a little, and closed his eyes with joy.

"I wouldn't sell him," said he.

"You think not," smiled the Colonel. "Neverthe-

less, I shall buy him. I'll offer you a hundred dollars, my boy."

"It would be selling part of myself. Loafer—he's a friend, you see."

"Five hundred dollars," said the Colonel.

"Sweet—sufferin'—mama!" said Doc Rivers.

"No, no!" said Philip.

"Think what you're saying," said the Colonel. "I'm offering you now a thousand dollars in hard cash. Enough to set you up in the world. A thousand dollars for a dog, young man!"

"Phil, don't you be a fool!" broke in Rivers, his eyes starting.

Philip folded his hands together and squeezed hard. He could hardly hear the words. He could only see the flashing blue eyes that seemed to threaten him with untold dangers. Yet he managed to stammer: "It's not exactly that he's a dog. But he's a friend, sir. I couldn't sell myself. I couldn't sell myself; I couldn't sell the dog!"

The Colonel lay back in his chair again and waved a great hand airily.

"There you are, Rivers. You come to me to buy me. Learn from your friend. I can't even buy his dog!"

CHAPTER XXIX

DOC RIVERS was greatly excited. There was some flaw in this reasoning, but he could not put his finger on it. The Colonel was talking down to him from a height, but he could not prevent the condescension.

"It's not the same," he ventured.

The Colonel shrugged his massive shoulders.

"There's a dog; here's a man. No price for one, no price for the other!"

Suddenly Rivers snatched out the chunk of ore and laid it in the lap of the Colonel.

"Look at that," he said.

The Colonel looked at it. It seemed to Philip that there was no alteration in his demeanor or in his expression, except that perhaps his blue eyes grew a little more flashingly bright, a little grayer, a little more like steel in the sun.

"That's an expensive bit of ore," he admitted.

"That's what the trouble's about," said Rivers. "I would of thought that Jolly was just a dead man, by this time. But this won't let me think that. Jolly found this. Somehow the Purchass gang know about it. They got him now. They're putting the pressure on him. Maybe they're offering him his life if he'll tell them about where this here gold is. You see? Now you know why we're here talkin' to you, sir."

The Colonel nodded. He weighed the rock on his forefinger.

"Somebody will be enormously rich out of this," he suggested.

"Richer'n Rockefeller!" said Rivers heartily. "And why shouldn't you be one?"

"I?" said the Colonel, and raised his brows, as though rather shocked by such a thought. "I! But my dear fellow, let me tell you that there's something else worth thinking about. My own attitude towards life. You see that I live here quietly. I detest disturbances. I like enough money to live on. In a modest way, I collect enough for my needs. And there you are! No desire for a vast fortune. None whatever! None whatever!"

He shook his head with violence, and while his eyes remained closed, Rivers shot at the boy a glance expressive of disgust and rage. Even Philip could see that there was a touch of hypocrisy about this fellow with his speeches about modest ambitions, small requirements of living. It was as though a pirate should pretend to the manner of a philosopher!

"I jus' want to point out," said Rivers gravely, "that this here ain't thousands. Maybe it's hundreds of thousands—maybe it's millions, Colonel!"

The Colonel raised a protesting hand. It was as smooth as stone, that hand, and the fingers were long and tapering.

"You can't tempt me," said he. "You really can't tempt me, my friend. To introduce the management of a large fortune into my quiet mode of life, to

occupy my mind with investments and—I couldn't dream of it. I couldn't dream of it! It is like the crash and roar of war. Years steal upon me; I grow more quiet. I lie here in the sun. I think of nothing. You cannot tempt me!"

And with that he looked so mildly upon Rivers and shook his head in such earnestness that Philip was almost tempted to believe what he heard.

Rivers closed his eyes and set his teeth.

"We'll offer you one-quarter out of every bit of profit that comes from the mine!" said he.

"If I bring young Delmar away from the Purchasses?" asked the Colonel.

"You and Phil, here, and me. We'd work. I know I'm not much good. But Phil is. I've seen him go through them like a canoe through water. They can't hold him. You and him together—that's what I mean!"

"A quarter for me and a quarter for Philip?" suggested the giant.

"Phil, he ain't interested so much in the money end of things."

"A young philosopher?" asked the giant, and he smiled vaguely upon Philip.

"Anyway," said Rivers, "I want you to give it a think. Twenty-five per cent. If you do the job, you never have to think about the thing afterwards. It's just in your hands!"

"A very large and handsome offer," said the Colonel, obviously thinking hard and fast. "But one never can tell. These promising veins pinch out."

"We might even trim up that percentage a little," suggested Rivers. "Say that we called it a third? One-third, Colonel. That's money, I guess!"

"One-third!" said the Colonel, and his blue eyes flashed.

Suddenly he shook his head.

"Let's talk of other things," said the Colonel, in his deliberate manner. "We waste our time about the mine. Besides, the business would be much too difficult for me. You overestimate me. I'm only mortal, Mr. Rivers!"

Rivers jumped up from his chair.

"Colonel," he said, "I'll go right to the top. One-half of everything for you—and no work on your part. One-half! One-half of the clear profits!"

The Colonel suddenly writhed in his chair, and for a single instant all the avarice in his soul was shown in his face.

"It's no use!" he declared. "By this time the Purchass people have made an agreement with young Delmar. His life in exchange for the location of the mine!"

"He'd never give in!" said Rivers.

"Ah? Is he a Spartan?"

"You laugh," said Doc Rivers, with a heat that surprised Philip. "I tell you, Jolly's better than folks take him for. He's been a fool. He knows it. He's wrecked his family. He knows that, too. Well, he's found the mine and that's his chance to even everything up and make his folks happy, and he'll die ten times quicker'n he'll tell what he knows!"

"Ah?" said the Colonel again.

"However," he added slowly, "there are ways of persuading people to speak!"

"He'll never give in," said Rivers obstinately. "I know it. I know how he's feeling inside. He'll die, quicker."

The Colonel sat bolt upright: "Young man," he said, "take your horse and go away. I don't want to talk any longer! Go at once. I—I'm tired and wish to rest in the sun!"

Doc Rivers groaned. He did not protest, however, but as one who knows that the end has been reached, he made a gesture of surrender and beckoned to Philip. The latter rose, also. He could hardly believe that the interview had been ended, so suddenly. Something had told him that the pangs of temptation were entering the giant, and that soon he would quite melt under the influence of the bribes which were being offered.

Rivers moved off hastily with a single word of farewell, but Philip lingered an instant, until the giant, without opening his tightly shut eyes—as though he felt the mere shadow of the young man's presence—said: "You too, my young friend. I wish to be alone."

"The dog," said Philip suddenly; "I wanted to say about the dog—"

At that, the blue eyes opened. They blazed out at Philip in a sort of unearthly brightness of triumph.

"You've changed your mind, have you? You'll sell your pet dog, after all?"

"Sell him?" echoed Philip with a shudder. "No,

no! But I'll give him away! I'll make an exchange, I mean to say."

"Go on, then. What will the exchange be?" asked the Colonel, most of the brilliance of victory—whatever could have inspired it—disappearing at once from his glance.

"You help us with Jolly Delmar," said Philip, "then I'll give you Loafer. I'll give you Loafer before, if you'll shake hands on the business!"

"You'll give your dog away for that?" asked the Colonel, a shadow falling quickly over his face. "But I hear that you have no share in the mine?"

"Oh, no," said Philip.

"Then why are you in it?"

"The Delmars are my friends."

"Friends?" cried the giant, and his voice fairly shook Philip with its thunder. "I know friends and friendships. I've never found them to wear. I've never found them to have any truth of substance. They don't last. Nothing in this living hell is given without pay. Nothing! What else do you want out of the Delmars? What can they give you? Tell me the truth!"

He reached out his hand, leaning from his chair, and caught the arm of Philip. He did not exert a great pressure, but Philip felt that he was hopelessly imprisoned, as though by the touch of unyielding iron.

"There's nothing else," said Philip, not quite honestly.

"There is—you lie to me," declared the Colonel.

The point seemed to him of the vastest importance. Then he sank back in the chair and nodded his head.

"It's the girl!" he exclaimed. And he nodded again. "Is that right?" he asked.

"I must not speak about it," said poor Philip.

"You must not? Speak about everything to me. I am a sea into which all secrets disappear. I am like conscience; I understand!"

Then he added: "You have her for wife if you bring back Jolly Delmar? She promised you that?"

"She gave me no promise," answered Philip.

The Colonel scowled blackly.

"I don't understand you," he said at last. "You had better go away. You annoy me. I don't understand. There's no promise made, and still you wish to throw your life away? I don't understand. Go away, young man. I wish to be alone!"

Poor Philip stroked the head of Loafer. It was a comfort that the great dog was to stay with him, but it was a thin comfort, after all. He said good-by in the faintest of voice, but as he was turning away the voice of the giant flooded about his ears once more.

"Come back!"

He returned and stood before the Colonel.

"Look at me," said the big man, and Philip looked fairly into those wild blue eyes.

CHAPTER XXX

SQUARELY met, they were not so difficult to withstand. Within them the blue, cold light was pouring up as in wave on wave and rushing out towards Philip. But he could stand against it. With every instant it was easier to stand before the other, and he felt that never again would such dreadful awe overcome him in the presence of this monster. It was as though he had been given a touch of rare understanding, a clue to a mystery; there was something about the Colonel which he had known all his life, though he could not give it a name!

"You can look at me," said the Colonel finally, "but are you honest? Are you honest?"

"I don't know," answered Philip, always simple.

"A girl smiles at you. You go out to conquer the world. Is that right?"

"Oh, no," said Philip. "I only want to help Jolly, if I can."

"She didn't give you a promise?"

"No."

"But you're pretty sure. Tell me that! You're pretty sure that if you bring Jolly home she'll fall into your arms?"

Philip looked far off, and Maizie came close home

into his mind, hard and gentle, cold and warm, so close to him that he could conjure her very flesh out of the empty air, and so far removed that he knew her not at all.

"I'm sure of nothing," he admitted gloomily.

The Colonel looked suddenly down to the ground, and it was impossible to doubt that some strength had departed from him. He looked older, to Philip, and whereas before he had seemed scant forty, he appeared closer to fifty, now.

"Will you smoke?" he asked.

"No, thank you sir."

"You don't smoke?"

"No, sir. I haven't learned."

The Colonel rolled a cigarette with tobacco which he took from a silver-chased box.

"Children unlock the door we stand without!" he murmured finally. He lighted his cigarette, and let the smoke roll upwards from his bright red lips; he was faintly obscured behind the mist of bluish white.

"My boy," said he, "you observe that I am older than you."

"Yes," said Philip.

"Older in years. Older in life. I have crossed many oceans. Voyaged to unknown lands. Lands you will never touch. As yet you are honest. Therefore I wish to give you good advice. Will you listen?"

"Yes," said Philip, filled with wonder.

"Then, like a surgeon, I use a knife. There is no time for an anæsthetic. My boy, you never will take young Delmar from the Purchass clan. Shall I tell

you why? Because I, also, have been retained by that clan!"

It struck Philip dumb. He could understand, now, why the big Colonel had writhed under the temptation of the offers which Rivers had made. They had been bargaining for that which was already sold and delivered.

"Did you hear?"

"I heard," said Philip.

"You have lost him; you never can have him. But there is still another matter, more important. You are young. You must have room to grow. You should be in a country where you can come to manhood without being overshadowed by fixed and firmly rooted trees. This is not such a country. You will have no room to expand. I, my boy, already am here! My advice to you is to go at once. Ride into another range. There you can grow into a man—into a great man; here you will not prosper. Here your life would not last a great length of time. Do you understand me?"

Philip was dumb again.

"Leave everything behind you, take nothing with you. Forget the girl. Then, if you wish, I will be happy to provide you with funds. You speak like a gentleman, though a young one. I will give you means to live like a gentleman—in another part of this little world of ours. But you must know from your books, that there is always trouble when two kings strive to rule in one land?"

So, gradually, Philip came at the meaning, and

turned crimson. The film of tobacco smoke seemed parted before the face of the Colonel, and he looked straight into the cold, terrible eyes. That speech had been calmly spoken, but it had an utter finality about it that overwhelmed him.

"I shall not go," said Philip. "I cannot go. I would be leaving my promises behind me!"

The Colonel leaned back in his chair once more and closed his eyes. He allowed his cigarette to fall to the ground. He was in every respect as Philip had first seen him, dreaming in the sun.

A farewell, now, would have seemed ridiculously out of place, so the boy turned hastily away and rejoined Doc Rivers at the horses. There he mounted, gave Loafer a kind word that sent the dog running ahead, and swung his mount back on the trail by which they had come.

"Well, kid?" asked Doc eagerly.

The mind and the heart of Philip were so full that he could not speak, at once.

"You look kind of sick," said Doc. "What did the Colonel drop on you?"

Philip shook his head.

"The damn hypocrite!" snarled Rivers. "He ain't interested in money. He don't want it. It'd disturb him. Why, there ain't a devil in hell worse'n him, and he knows it—and he knew that I knew it—but he knew that I didn't dare to answer him back!"

He writhed at the memory of his impotence, and so they journeyed back up the hill and turned on to the winding trail. For a half hour they jogged along,

and then Rivers pointed to a trail that left theirs and turned to the right, stretching towards the mountains.

"I thought that maybe there'd be three of us coming back, and that the Colonel would go along with us to the Purchass place. But we're beat. Damn him, why wouldn't he listen? I was offerin' him God knows what!"

"Because he's with the Purchass people; they've retained him," said Philip.

"What!"

"He told me that."

"You don't mean it! He actually told you that?"

"And he told me to get out of this part of the country. He said that there wasn't room here for him and for me."

Doc Rivers whistled softly.

"Are you as big as that in his eyes?" murmured the little man.

Philip sighed bitterly.

"What can we do?" he asked. "But now, I think, is our time. The Colonel is behind us. We know that much. We can get to the Purchass place ahead of him, no doubt. Doc, suppose that we start for them now, and see what we can do?"

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean that. What's there better to do?"

Rivers rubbed his hands violently together, as though they had turned numb with cold in spite of the hot sun. Then he grasped the reins.

"If the Colonel talked like that, then you got a chance to do anything in the world. Kid, I'm ready

to take my chance. Come along, and we'll look at the tigers even if we can't get one of their skins!"

They went hastily up the trail. It divided into two forks, and Rivers took the left one, declaring that the other was the main-traveled way. This which they followed would take them around behind the house.

Steadily they climbed, with the western sun in their faces. Once Rivers exclaimed softly, "I can't get warm. That devil of a man has put a chill all through my blood. I can't get warm, kid!"

Philip felt much the same. And besides, a brooding gloom had settled over him. He had not the slightest hope; he felt that he was riding forward merely because there was nothing left to do. It was a forlorn hope, and they two were going to scratch at the door of the castle filled with ogres.

In the meantime, constantly climbing, they topped the first broad-backed ridge, and saw a narrow valley behind them. Rivers looked back, then spurred his horse into a little thick of saplings, and Philip followed him.

"It's him! He's coming!" said Rivers.

A moment later, Philip heard the crashing hoofs of a heavy horse. He could peer out through the close ranks of the saplings, and through them he saw a mighty horseman on a lofty horse rush past. The brim of his sombrero was blown straight up by the speed of that hard gallop, and the rider wore a cloak which flared stiff out behind him.

So the Colonel rushed past, and there was a fleeting glimpse of his wide shoulders, disappearing instantly as he dropped down the slope.

They looked at one another, silent and grim.

"He never goes no slower than 'that,'" said Rivers at last. "That's the way he always rides. And what about it, kid?" chuckled Doc sardonically. "Are we gunna get there before him?"

He rode out from the trees and pointed the head of his horse back down the trail.

"Come along," he said. "We're beat to a frazzle."

Then, seeing Philip was moving in the opposite direction: "What you mean, kid?"

"I'm going on," said Philip. "Just to have a look!"

"Phil, are you crazy?"

"I don't know. Only, I know that I can't turn back!"

Suddenly Doc Rivers ranged alongside of him.

"I'd rather of lost ten thousand dollars than of met you!" said Doc sadly. "Doggone me if you ain't a curse!"

"Go back, Doc," said Philip without reproach in his voice. "I don't ask you to go ahead."

"Shut up," answered Rivers angrily. And he actually spurred his horse ahead.

Philip, vaguely wondering, followed.

They launched into the valley; they slowly climbed the steep slope beyond, passed into a grove of young pines, and came out on the other verge in sight of a wide and shallow valley, and in the midst of it a thick

clump of lofty trees. There was no house visible, but Philip knew that it was the Purchass place. He knew it as though he had seen it before, in some dream of fear.

CHAPTER XXXI

DOWN came the evening, still and soft and warm, and the two remained on the verge of the woods, Doc Rivers pressing urgently for a return to their friends, so that they could recruit forces to attack the house of the enemy. But Philip would not stir.

Numbers, he knew, they could not raise; at least, they never could command sufficient forces to rush the house. Whatever they accomplished they must accomplish by stealth, and all the chances were strongly against them, for it seemed apparent that the Colonel knew they had headed towards the Purchass house; for no other reason would he have been apt to rush so fast to gain the place before them.

On that subject, even Doc Rivers grew eloquent.

"We threw a chill into the Colonel," he declared. "He went like hell, didn't he? We threw a scare into him. I tell you, kid, that since we busted through them and got Jolly to his home, they're all more or less afraid of us!"

Doc Rivers, after the passage of a few hours, could not help giving himself a little credit for events in which he had had no share whatever. He confessed that he had no desire to approach the Purchass house more closely, but he would not leave Philip. While their horses grazed on a slope behind, they lay on a

bed of pine needles and stared through the glasses at the trees, until it grew dusk. Then Philip insisted on moving, and mounting his mustang, he rode down across the ridge and cut away towards the trees.

"It's fine, kid," said the uneasy Rivers. "You've done a lot. But what are you gunna do now? Scratch some boards off of the wall of the house and go in and tear up the gang like a lot of playing cards? There ain't any use in being too wild, old son!"

He began to groan aloud, as Philip persisted silently in pressing on towards the trees, which rose more and more lofty before them. Philip himself had no plan; he was drawn forward much as the bird is drawn by the snake's eye. At least, he was in the presence of the enemy, and that was some comfort. He would have at least that to report to Maizie, when he saw her again, and her bright and critical eyes fell upon him.

Close to the forest which surrounded the Purchass place, at last he made a halt. Poor Doc Rivers pressed close beside him. Even when he whispered, his voice trembled.

"Kid," he said, "are you gunna turn back, now?"

"We've got to have a look at things," said Philip.

"Sweet — sufferin' — mama!" groaned Rivers. "Look? Why, we can smell those trees! And if we're spotted, kid, they got horses that would be sure to run us down. You hear?"

"I hear you," answered Philip. "You go in here, if you want. I'll circle around and come in from the other side. I'll work as close to the house as I dare.

If I find out anything, I'll come back to this place, and I'll wait for you here, if you haven't come back."

"Go in among those trees? Go closer to the house?" exclaimed Doc Rivers. "Kid, you're crazy, that's all. Clean crazy! I'll never touch the game. I—"

"Good-by," said Philip. "I'll come back when I can. You stay here with the horses, then!"

He dismounted, tossed the reins into the hands of his companion, and in a few steps the silhouette of Rivers was lost behind him in the dark. It seemed to him as he crossed the gap between him and the edge of the trees, that enemies must be ranged there at wait for him, guns in hand, smiling as they watched him walking into the trap. Only when he actually stood beside the broad, rough trunk of a tree did he feel a bit of comfort. The honest smell of the evergreens, the silence, the gentle wind that touched the trees reassured Philip. He waited for some moments until his eyes were more accustomed to the deep shadows beneath the trees, then he started slowly forward.

Loafer led the way, stalking as though he knew that game and dangerous game lay before them. They passed through a belt of ancient pines, lofty and huge of trunk; then they reached a roadway, and Philip turned aside from this, not caring to take the risk of making noise with his heels on the gravel of the drive. He had barely changed direction when the dog stopped and crouched. Philip, his heart in his throat, sank upon his knees, and then saw two

forms looming out of the night, suddenly, as forms always come through thick darkness.

He kept a Colt ready; this would be a case of shooting to kill, he knew.

They seemed fairly on top of Philip when they paused. Reason told him to shoot before they poured in their fire upon him, but an instinct made him hold on for another moment.

"This here is blind-man's bluff," rumbled a deep voice.

"Sure it is, Bert," answered the second man.

"Besides," said Bert, "he's crazy, but he'd never be fool enough to tackle this place."

"Not up the road, anyway. The Colonel's getting old."

"I gotta mind to go back and turn in."

"He'll wring your neck, if you do."

The other cursed softly, for a moment; Philip remembered those voices well. He knew that Bert and Archie Chisholm were before him there in the night and the chill of fear grew colder.

"One of these days I'm gunna stand up to the Colonel," said Bert Chisholm. "He's getting old!"

"He's a mountain," answered Archie.

"Where is he now?"

"Up on the roof with old Purchass. They're hatching something."

"Maybe the kid will come in by the roof," chuckled Bert.

"It's the only place he can get in."

"Ain't Purchass and the Colonel enough to guard the roof?"

"They won't be looking for anything that way."

"It's gunna be a long night. Let's hunt through the far side of the woods, there, and find a place to sleep in, turn and turn about. We can kick together a bed of pine needles."

They swerved to the side. Instantly they were lost to view, but there was no sound. Noiselessly as they had loomed up before Philip, so now they disappeared again into the dark among the trees. But Philip remained crouched, his thoughts spinning.

He was inclined to believe what he had heard the two say—that entrance into the house would be impossible, for if Purchass and the Colonel had devised a watch so careful that even the precincts of the house were patrolled, within the place there must be a strict watch. The only way was by the roof, and there on the roof the Colonel and Purchass were "hatching something."

Then he worked straightforward until he came to the verge of the trees and looked across a narrow clearing at the long, lofty black mass of the house. There was not a trace of life about it for a time. Then, inside one of the black windows he saw a faint glow of light, instantly extinguished—such a glow as comes when a cigarette is lighted and the match put out at once.

From that he could guess that men waited and watched inside the silence of the house, and he drew a long breath of dread. For suppose that he had

attempted an entrance through one of those apparently sleeping windows!

Slowly he worked his way towards the back of the place, constantly watching the roof line. There were places where he might be able to climb, to be sure. But nearly all of those places ran close to windows, where a guard on the inside would be sure to hear him at his work.

The back of the house seemed to present no more favorable opportunity. It was, in fact, flatter and more unpromising than the rest of the building. But there was at least a noise which might cover any sound he made in climbing. For a great windmill stood near by, its wheel, raised above the tops of the trees, spinning in a great solid disk of shadow high overhead, and the pump clanking softly and steadily while some uncoiled part of the gears groaned gently, at regular intervals. Listening more carefully, he even could hear the whisper of the wheel, as it worked.

The tank was built into the roof of the house, and there was a pipe running from the tank to the mill itself. Down that, of course, the water ran into the reservoir. Sometimes those pipes were the flimsiest tin; sometimes they were stout iron, and if this were an iron pipe, Philip saw that his work was not so difficult.

He went straight to the windmill and there crouched, listening, straining his eyes. He saw nothing, he heard nothing from the labor of the pump, and the whishing of the water inside the casing. So he made up his mind.

First he whispered to Loafer to sit down, and as the great dog obeyed, he knew that nothing would take the animal from that post until his master returned. Then he began to climb the ladder which stretched up the gaunt side of the mill.

He went up slowly, pausing now and again to look down into the dim pit of darkness which formed beneath his feet, or to scan the windows of the house. The upper-story windows took the light of the stars like dim mirrors of black glass, but never was there sight or sound of a human being.

He reached the lofty platform of the mill, at last. From that point of vantage, lying flat, he could look beyond the great grove of trees and across the surrounding valley to the hills. He spotted the direction in which he had left poor Doc Rivers, and vaguely he wondered if Doc's failing nerves would permit him to remain at his post of watch until he, Philip, returned.

In the meantime, his own position was very bad. If he were spotted on the windmill, he was cut off from all possible help. He was ended!

So he made haste to swing down below the platform to the point where the pipe ran from the casing of mill to the roof. He tested that pipe with all his weight. He jerked heavily on it, and heard a faint tremor go down the long casing. But the pipe seemed very solid.

He did not hesitate after that to trust himself to it, and he swung by his hands, working like a monkey down the pipe until he reached the tank. It was per-

fectly simple to make a landing. There was a small ladder running up the face of the heavy tank, and by this he got on to the cover of the tank.

He lay there flat on his face, recovering his breath, and when he could breathe more easily, he heard the voices of men speaking in the near distance.

Crawling to the inward side of the tank, he found that it projected a scant seven feet above the level of a flat roof; and now the voices were plainly audible. He almost could hear the words which were spoken; and certainly he distinguished at once the speaking tones of the Colonel. The air quivered with his great voice, though now it was subdued.

Both the speakers were hidden behind some irregularities of the roof, and Philip, without more ado, lowered himself from the top of the tank and prepared to step forward in the adventure.

CHAPTER XXXII

It was a spotted night, with clouds like vast continents hanging from a glimmering sea of stars, and yet this starlight was enough to show Philip his way across the roof and so, slipping furtively from place to place, guided continually by the voices of the speakers, he came in due time to a big, wide-built chimney from behind which he could peer at the subjects of his quest—and he saw before him the giant Colonel and with him a long-bearded old man whose back was a bow with age.

They sat in a flattened portion of the roof—a sort of roof-garden, though there was not a trace of greenery—and the pair sat at a little table. A closely hooded light burned upon it, and the graniteware coffee pot gleamed under that light, and the two cups of the companions.

The old man of the beard had reached a point of high excitement.

“Thorough! Thorough!” said the old man, and stamped on the roof his cane, or rather staff, for it was rough and rugged as the bough of a tree. “We ain’t gunna do nothing halfway. We’re gunna be thorough!”

The Colonel leaned back in his chair until it creaked under the clumsy burden of his bulk.

"Very well, Purchass," said he. "Thorough you may be, but not thorough in the way you wish to be, if I'm to be a partner of this affair."

The old man was very angry. The impatience of age was upon him, and he freshened his grasp upon his stick. They were enormous hands; on a day that must have been a Herculean form.

"Tell me," he demanded, "am I a fool?"

"You are a wise man, Purchass," said the Colonel in his quiet voice which, no matter how lowered, still possessed a ringing quality; so that when he finished speaking it was always as though a great bell had been struck in the distance. "I've not been near when you were in your youth or your middle age. But I've seen your sons and your grandsons. You've multiplied one stem into a good-sized forest, and I honor you for it."

"You're sneerin' and talkin' down at me again," declared Purchass as bitterly as before. "Every one of 'em crooked, you'd mean to be saying?"

"Strength is what we want in this world," declared the Colonel, unshaken by this bitter anger and hostility. "Strength is what we want, and strength is undoubtedly what you have. I've never seen a Purchass who was a weakling. I never expect to see one. I'm not sneering at you, my friend. You and your big family of seven sons—and I don't know how many grandsons—"

"Twenty-two," said the other.

He was old enough to allow himself to be knocked from the original topic by this maneuver of the Colonel's.

"My boys was nine, and seven raised families. They had twenty-two sons, and ten of 'em still are alive. Ten of 'em still are alive."

"Only ten of twenty-two? That's hard luck," remarked the Colonel.

"A damned high percentage," said the old ruffian, stamping the roof with his stick again. "They been high-blooded racers all of their lives. And in the kind of races that they run, hell takes the hindermost. A damned high percentage," he continued, raising his roar of a voice, which broke with a tremor of years. "I'm contented. I ain't raised a crop of wheat. I've raised a crop of men!"

"You have," assented the Colonel. "And you've done it well. You've done the thing that you started out to do. That's what I call success."

Melancholy instantly took the place of old Purchass's exultation.

"Success? It's nothin' now to what it was," he admitted. "There was a time that you can remember yourself, Colonel, when I had this country by the throat. No man dared to move without askin' me first. I was the boss. They had to come to me. I was fair; but I was boss. And when a man questioned me, I busted him like a stick! Well, we're different, now. The law come in like a rain. And you come, Colonel, too; you gave folks something else to think about. How many of my boys have died under your guns and under your hands?"

"Only four, I believe," said the Colonel.

And, huge as he was, brave as Philip guessed him

to be, yet he shuddered when he thought of any man making such an admission in the very house of the Purchass family, and to this grim and patriarchal tyrant.

However, to his surprise old Purchass showed no signs of anger. He merely wagged his head, apparently in content.

"Some would of tried to stamp you out," he explained. "Some would of tried to kill you. I could of had it done. But it would of cost four more lives among my sons, and we couldn't spare that many. So I stopped 'em short. I called the feud off. Did I?"

"You did, Purchass."

"When we could rule with the bare hand, we ruled with the bare hand," said Purchass. "But after that time passed, then I seen that it was time to try another line, and another line I tried. Brains! I used brains! You can't bully ten thousand citizens. I didn't try. I slipped out of the sun. I got into a corner. I lay low. Them that valued me come to me. That's the way that I worked it, and every year we get fatter. We got money in the bank, Colonel. We got money in the bank!"

"You've done very wisely," replied the Colonel.

"And now," went on Purchass, "comes the time I've been waiting for. Once in a life a gent sits in at a million-dollar game. Now, there you are! We got the million—and you begin to raise hell!"

"I don't raise hell," responded the Colonel.

"You stop me dead in my tracks!" snarled the savage veteran.

"While I'm in the house—yes!" said the Colonel.
"I won't have it go on while I'm in the house!"

Old Purchass seemed too angry to make any reply. His big, gnarled hands grasped the stick as though they would break it, but eventually he shrugged his shoulders. He settled in the chair, his head fallen low, and his eyes gleaming from under his bushy brows.

"A million—and you're in on it!" he snapped.

"I don't want money in that way," said the Colonel.

"Bah!" roared Purchass, losing all control.

At this, the Colonel also settled back in his chair, and he poured himself a second cup of coffee, and carefully flavored it.

"Are you ready to listen?" he asked.

There was only a growl from Purchass.

"I had a call from the others today," he said. "They offered me a half interest, Purchass!"

"What others?"

"The boy—and Rivers."

"You broke their necks!" exclaimed Purchass.

"Ambassadors have certain sacred rights," said the giant, smiling.

"Sacred hell!" cried Purchass. "You drive me mad."

"I'm sorry. I wanted you to see the other side of this thing."

"They offered you half?"

"Yes."

"If you could find out where the mine was?"

"Naturally."

"Ah, but how could you do that?"

"Would it have been hard for me to get the boy to talk?"

Purchass stared. He began to rub his chin.

"But," said the Colonel, "I stand by my word. I made my first bargain with you, that I'd never have anything to do with the opposite camp, and I've never broken my word!"

"No," admitted Purchass. "You're an honest man. You're an honest man!"

He repeated this, as though he had to convince himself by saying the words twice over.

"Where's the boy now?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know. Somewhere near this house, I suppose."

"Hey?"

"Somewhere near the house, Purchass. He's on this trail!"

"Let him be on it. He's mad. Is he mad, Colonel?"

"A little, perhaps. Very, very dangerous, Purchass. The most dangerous—"

He paused, unwilling to commit himself.

"I'll send in another guard," said Purchass. "I'm gunna keep that Delmar sewed up tight. I'll send in another!"

He raised his voice.

"Joe!"

"Tell me," asked the Colonel curiously, "how any man in the world could be foolish enough to get into this house—alone! Can you tell me that?"

"I dunno," said the old man. "But I take no

chances. I take no chances. It's a million-dollar game. And another touch of the screws will make Delmar yowl like a cat!"

He began to laugh, and it was like the laughter of a demon. Philip, lying behind the chimney, turned cold as he listened. He was beginning to feel, more and more, that the Colonel was right, and that no one other than a perfect fool would have ventured to this house and thrown himself, practically, into the hands of his enemies.

What were the screws, another turn of which would make Jolly Delmar "yowl like a cat?"

A man who looked the part of a brown-faced puncher from the range appeared in the door which opened from the roof to the house.

"Well, governor?" he asked.

"Where's Dorman?"

"He's asleep."

"Why in hell is he sleeping?"

"He's just come in from the trail."

"I said all hands up tonight. I meant just that! Get the hound up!"

"All right," said Joe, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Get him up, and tell him that I want him in that room with Delmar. You hear me?"

"I hear you," said the other.

"And if he closes an eye before the morning comes, I'll have his skin off; I'll peel him alive and let him burn in the sun. You hear?"

"I'll tell him."

"Now get out."

The puncher disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Now that a stronger guard had been established over young Delmar, old Purchass might have been expected to relax, but his nervousness persisted. Presently he started up and declared that he would begin a circuit of the house to make sure that his men were properly posted; the Colonel suggested that he, at least, remain to watch the roof.

At this the old man snapped: "Is this boy, this crazy boy, a bird? Can he fly, Colonel? How's he to get up to this roof, I ask you?"

Said the Colonel: "There is a wise rule in case of danger, Purchass: Always expect the impossible."

"Be damned to your rules!" said the brutal old man. "Come along with me, Colonel. We'll look the sleepers over."

And he stamped the roof with his stick again, as he turned away towards the door.

The Colonel followed him. He had to bow low to pass through the doorway. Down the narrow hallway that showed beyond, Philip watched them pass, and saw old Purchass suddenly thrust open a door and snarl: "Delmar, you young fool, are you gunna talk now?"

With a racing pulse Philip listened for an answering voice, but he heard none. There was only a pause,

then with an oath Purchass thrust the door shut. It crashed, and the echo rang like a shot through the house, causing a distant stirring, here and there, as though men were rousing in alarm.

"Now hell is gunna open for that young fool!" declared old Purchass, and he walked on down the hall, followed by the enormous form of the Colonel.

Philip grew weak with excitement. He had located the very room of the captive. It was close enough, to be sure, but every foot of that lighted hall swarmed with terrors; there was in the chamber a guard, naturally armed to the teeth; that formidable ruffian, Joe Dorman, was coming to double the watch, and would arrive at any instant.

Yet now, if ever, was his time to try—before Dorman arrived! The fear that held Philip trembling was counterbalanced by a whirlwind sense of confusion, and in that confusion a determination to strike forward. Now that he had come so near, he would take the last chance, lead where it might!

With the resolution turning to iron in his soul, he started up from the chimney hiding place and ran crouching across the flat surface of the roof. He headed for the hall, but as he ran, he saw Joe Dorman turn into it from below.

He jerked up his revolver to fire; but then he remembered that though Dorman was clearly in view, he himself might not be in range of the vision of the outlaw, for he was in the outer dark. He leaped to the side, therefore, and since he had no time to go to any other hiding place, he crouched in the corner,

close to the angle which the parapet of the wall made the upper story of the house.

He held his breath. The heavy step of Dorman came up the hall with a jingle of spurs which, apparently, that inveterate horseman never removed from his heels. Over the hook of his arm, Philip had seen a sawed-off shotgun with the beautiful steel of its double barrels glistening in the lamplight. He knew something of sawed-off shotguns, and like all West-erners, he dreaded them at close action more than any other weapon.

The heels of Dorman stopped jingling. There was a crash as of a door kicked open. Then loud voices conversed.

"You, Mac, why'n hell ain't you enough to look after a sick man on top of a house? D'you have to have a whole damn army to help you do nothin' at all?"

The voice of Mac was pitched shrill in protest.

"I never asked for no help!" he said. "Damned if I ever asked for no help at all."

"You lie," said Dorman. "You was afraid that mealy mouthed kid would come and bust you in two. Nothin' would do for you except help. You had to have me."

"I'd be damned before I'd ask for you to help me in anything!" roared the tormented Mac.

"Look out how you're talkin'!" snarled Dorman.

"I know how I'm talkin'. Because you're Joe Dorman ain't a reason that you can wipe your boots on me, and be damned to you!"

"I'm gunna have this out with you!" said Dorman savagely.

"Have it out when you please. I'll go out on the roof and have it out with you now!"

"You skunk!" Dorman cried. "You know that the old man won't stand for any fightin' in his house. That's why you talk up so big!"

"Come down with me to the ground, then."

"You talk like a fool. Besides, you're bluffin'. Go on outside and cool off for a minute; I'll watch Delmar while you take a breath. Go on, Mac, don't be a fool!"

The words of Dorman were rough enough, but the tone in which they were spoken was so gentle that Philip guessed "Mac" was formidable enough to make even the celebrated Dorman think twice before inviting a battle.

"I don't want no trouble with you," said Mac, appeased at once. "Only, you gotta treat me like a man, Joe. I ain't a dog. Not yet! I never took water in my life; I ain't gunna start now."

"Go on and get out, kid," advised Dorman. "Take a walk on the roof. I'll watch this gent for you. You been cramped up here for so long that you ain't nacheral in the head. You're lookin' for trouble!"

Mac's footfall was heard down the hall, and Philip glanced frantically around him. The parapet which outlined the space of the level roof also ran a few feet down the side of the wall, so that a man could hang by the hands and work his way for some distance, until he was close to the first window—and that, Philip

felt, must be the window of the room in which the prisoner was guarded.

He laid a hand on the parapet, about to swing himself over, but the shadow of Mac that instant stepped through the doorway on to the roof.

"Hello," said Mac, "who's that?"

Now, once or twice before, cornered by Uncle Oliver after the commission of some sin, Philip had been prone to work out an excuse by a pretense of weariness and non-concern. And in his desperation, now, he was able to think of nothing better to do than to lean his elbow on the parapet of the roof and with his hand cover his mouth while he yawned deliberately and noisily.

Only, from the corner of his eye, he was watching the other keenly, aiming his gun, so to speak, before he drew it. Mac, however, seemed unsuspecting.

"Is that you, Pete, you lazy hound?" he asked impolitely. "Say, you got those two bucks that you owe me, yet?"

And he turned and bore straight down upon Philip, driven on by an evil Fate.

Philip dared not speak. The first word from him doubtless would call out a gun into the hand of the stranger, and whether he failed or won, the noise of one explosion would fill that roof with armed men.

He thanked God for the darkness of that corner, and with a shrug of his shoulder, he dipped his left hand into his trousers' pocket.

Moreover, that gesture was an excuse to dip his

head, and only under the very edge of the brim of his hat did he watch Mac approach.

That unlucky fellow came with hand outstretched.

"I've waited long enough," he said. "Quit fumbling, and fork over, you big lump a—"

He got no farther, for at that instant he stepped into range, and as he did so, the left foot of Philip stole forward, gripped the roof, and his right hand shot over.

It seemed for an instant as though he had hit the head off the shoulders of Mac, so far back did it bob. The strong body of the man remained strangely erect, and Philip was able to catch it in his arms and prevent a fall.

Loose and senseless Mac rested in the arms of the boy, until Philip began to look wildly around him, wondering what he could do next. At least he removed the weapons from his captive, and what an armory!

There were two full-sized Colts on the hips of this man. In one coat pocket there was a bulldog revolver. Inside his belt he carried a tiny little two-barreled pistol which hardly filled the palm of a man's hand; but at ten yards doubtless it would kill a man or knock him down. Perhaps it was intended for that very purpose, thought Philip—placed so that it could be secretly removed, and covered all the while by the very hand which was holding it ready to fire! In addition to the four guns, there was a massive bowie knife which looked heavy and sharp enough to whittle down a tree, and inside the bowie knife there was a second bit of steel, a deadly little Italian stiletto.

Certainly Mac was an accomplished warrior, if he knew how to manage this complicated array of weapons!

But what should Philip do with him?

If he left him behind and went forward, the stunned man might recover consciousness at any moment. If he gagged him and bound him—for that he had no rope, and even if he had, he did not know how to accomplish a gagging. He was more apt to choke the fellow!

So, with cold sweat running on his face, Philip wished himself in quite another part of the world at that moment. Mac was beginning to revive, mumbling rapidly, and Philip, bending his head, heard a jargon of which he understood nothing:

"I'll raise you five, sucker! You can add tén to that! I'll go you five more—Well, here's twenty more to sort of round things off. I'll call that. Lemme see what you got, and lemme see it quick! My God—where am I—my head!"

The last words were gasped out as poor Mac found his feet, swaying heavily against the hand of Philip. The latter held the cold nose of a revolver under the chin of Mac. The touch of the steel roused Mac almost at once.

"You're safe, I hope," said Philip. "I don't wish to do any real harm to you. I'm very sorry that I had to strike you."

"I'm shot through the head," groaned Mac. "I can feel where your fist tore out through my brains."

"Will you talk quietly, please?"

"Hell, kid, I'll talk like a ghost," said Mac, with earnestness.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HE stepped back against the wall and raised his arms voluntarily above his head.

"That's not necessary," said Philip at once.

"Of course it ain't," said Mac, lowering his hands instantly. "I'd as soon take a chance with a grizzly as with you. You're the kid, ain't you?"

"My name is Philip," he answered.

"Yeah, you're the one. My God—and I wouldn't believe when Bert told me. My head is cracked in two!"

There was a mixture of careless mockery of himself and the occasion, with real pain and dizziness in this speech.

"I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do!" sighed Philip.

A wind which had been lurking in the heavens drove with a sudden roar through the surrounding trees and sent a stinging volley into the face and the eyes of Philip. In a moment the water had cut through his clothes to the skin. He felt himself growing chilled, and he needed his warmest and most active strength for this labor.

"Of course you dunno what to do," said Mac. "Only—what you after?"

"I think you can guess," said Philip.

"You come for Delmar, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Poor kid," said the outlaw. "I'm goddam sorry for him. But he ought to of yapped. That would of fixed things for him. He ought to of yapped, I tell you. They would of let off on him. Now it won't do you any good to get to him."

"Why not?"

"Because he couldn't walk, even if he had the chance."

"What have they done?" asked Philip, hardly able to make the words come.

"It was Old Man Purchass," said Mac. "Of course he's a devil."

That answer was rather oblique, but it meant enough to Philip to make him accept it without further question.

"Will you tell me something?" he asked.

"I'll tell you."

"Is there any other man than Dorman in that room?"

"There ain't. Ain't Joe enough?"

He chuckled, and then added: "You're beat, kid. You've done wonderful fine in getting this far. I wouldn't believe it. I wouldn't think it could be done. How'd you manage it?"

"I came up the windmill," said Philip absently.

"The—hell!" exclaimed the other.

"Will you please speak more softly?"

"Sure—sure, kid. I forgot. You blasted the noise

out of me. Windmill? I understand! You come all alone?"

"Yes."

"I've heard of such things," said Mac thoughtfully.

He seemed interested in the whole adventure in rather a detached, impersonal manner, as though there were little between him and the present moment.

"What you gunna do?" asked Mac.

"I don't know," sighed Philip again.

"Beat it," said Mac. "I wanna tell you something; who d'you think's here?"

"Who?"

"The Colonel, kid!"

He said it in a sort of savage triumph. Philip heard the vibration of silent, triumphant laughter.

"I know that," answered Philip. "He was here on the roof. I listened to him talking."

"Lord love me! And you didn't cut and run?"

"I've got to go on," said Philip sadly. "I can't turn back."

"They'll feed you to the dogs," said Mac with earnestness. "Kid, they say you ain't the world's champion thinker. Lemme help you out. Lemme give you the tip. Turn and git! Even if you get to him, what can you do for him?"

"Thank you very much," said Philip. "But I've thought of something. Do you mind walking ahead of me down the hall?"

"Are you gunna go into the house, kid?"

"Yes. When you come to the door of the room

where they're guarding Jolly Delmar, please call out Mr. Dorman."

"Listen!" said the excited Mac, but he broke off short and merely growled: "Well, it's gotta happen to you some day. Why not now?"

With that he turned on his heel and led the way down the hall. Their steps were carefully chosen, and yet Philip thought that the echoes of their tread was as heavy as the booming of cannon. Cautiously he put his feet down in time with his leader.

Mac paused.

"What'll I say, kid?" he asked.

Now, as he turned in the light, and the lamp shone with some brightness against his face, Philip saw a great crimson patch along the jaw of Mac. It was puffing rapidly. Already he had to talk from one side of his face, and in addition, so terrible had been the shock of that blow, a small trickle of blood stained the mouth and the chin of unlucky Mac. His good nature, however, was unfaltering.

"You're only a goddam kid, ain't you?" he whispered, looking Philip up and down.

"I suppose I am," said Philip, feeling how vastly he lacked the wisdom of these worldly men.

"Now what'll I say?"

"I don't know. Something, to get him out here."

"I want to see his face when you feed that gun into it. I wanna see it," sighed Mac with a yearning light in his eyes. "Lemme think."

He raised his voice: "Hey, Joe."

"Hey?" queried a drawling voice inside.

"C'mon out, will you?"

"Aw, why should I?"

"I wanna show you something."

"What?"

"I wanna show you."

"Gwan away, will ya? I'm gettin' asleep."

"You better wake up, Joe. You better come out here."

"Why can't you come in here?"

"Open the door, and you'll see why!"

Philip caught his breath. It seemed to him that this surely exposed the situation. However, there was a clump of feet dropping to the floor, a rattle of spurs, and the door dashed open with:

"Why don't you take the mush out of your mouth when you start to—"

He paused and gasped.

The damaged face of Mac was grinning at him in a lopsided fashion, and over Mac's shoulder glimmered the steady muzzle of a long, heavy Colt.

"Will you raise your hands over your head?" asked Philip gently.

Joe Dorman jerked his hands so high that they rapped against the upper jamb of the door.

"Back into the room, please!"

Mr. Dorman retreated. His eyes were enormous. He kept repeating with loose lips: "It ain't possible. I don't believe it. It ain't possible!"

Mac came next, and Philip, in the rear, thrust the door gently to.

As he stepped into the room, from the corner of

his eye he saw the half-dressed form of Jolly Delmar lying on the cot, a bloodstained cloth wrapped around his head and his face ten years older than it had been at their last meeting. Now Jolly thrust himself up on his arms, and they shook violently under his weight.

"It's the kid!" he said, his jaw sagging down. "It's the kid," he echoed himself, hollowly.

And then he sank back on the bed, and rolled his feverish eyes at the trio as though it were a picture, a portion of a useless dream.

"You see?" said Mac. "What could you do with him?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" said Philip, growing white with both fear and horror.

"Go on back," said the dull voice of Jolly. "It ain't any good to be here. I can't walk!"

"You've got to walk," said Philip desperately, but still keeping his gun on the pair before him.

"Look!" commanded Jolly.

He dragged back the cover which was spread over his legs, and Philip had one blurred glimpse of red-stained bandages around those legs, from knees to ankles.

"That's all!" croaked Jolly, and his head dropped back once more, loosely, heavily.

Philip moistened his dry, white lips. He tried to think, but his brain refused to stir.

"You see," said Mac gently, "you're beat, kid. There ain't a thing that you can do. You couldn't carry him down the windmill, son, I reckon!"

And the brain of Philip began to act once more. He set his teeth; his thoughts were clear.

"Face the wall!" he ordered.

And when they had obeyed him mechanically, only Dorman still muttering, unnerved, he picked up some cords which lay over the foot of the bed—placed there for some hellish purpose, he could guess.

With those, he secured the hands, and next the feet of the pair behind them, and after that, working feverishly, he stuffed a bandanna into the mouth of each, and next tied them back to back on the floor. They made a writhing mass of useless humanity. Joe Dorman began to turn purple, and worked his jaws convulsively on the gag, but Philip would not loosen it.

Sweat of fear and horror and despair was streaming down his face as he turned to Jolly.

"Will you live if you stay here?" he asked.

"I'll die before I'll talk to 'em," said Jolly savagely. "But lean over, kid. They can't hear. I'll whisper you where the mine is. Tell Dad, I was glad to die, this way. I didn't care. Tell him God bless him, and old Maizie. Leave me lie here, and you take the news back to them that the mine is—"

"Hush!" said Philip gently. "I'll never leave you here. What's the mine? It's you that they want!"

CHAPTER XXXV

STRENGTH is not a matter of poundage, but now and again—to one man in fifty million—there is given a strange quality of muscle and nerve which sets him out beyond the touch of the fellows who surround him; and that gift was Philip's.

He lifted the broken body of Jolly, and the latter groaned softly with exquisite anguish of soul, and flesh.

"It's no good. I'm gunna die!" whispered Jolly. "The mine is—"

"Save your strength, save your strength!" urged Philip.

He gave a last glance at the purple face of Dorman—pray God the man would not be choked, but now there was no time. He noted the interested eye of Mac, watching him with care. Then he stepped for the door, with Jolly Delmar lying in his left arm as lightly as the shotgun, not many moments before, had lain in the arm of Dorman.

He glanced up and down the hall. It was empty. A draught of air was tossing the flame in the throat of the lamp which lighted it. Jolly laughed weakly.

"Up and down," he croaked. "Like bein' in a boat! Like goin' over the waves, kid."

"Hush, hush!" pleaded Philip, and carried his burden swiftly out on to the roof.

He looked up, half fearfully, dreading to see all overcast, but instead, he found that every star was crystal clear through the mountain air, and a broad arch of scattered lights powdered half the universe. The glimpse of them gave him strength. He even paused and whispered to Jolly: "Look! There's the stars. We're going to win through, I think!"

"I don't wanna look at 'em," breathed Jolly. "It—it makes my head spin!"

And he tightened the grip of his arms around the neck of the boy. At the same moment the voice of Mac, unstifled by gag or intervening wall, rang terribly clear through the house, and booming out upon the roof: "Help! Help! They've got through! Help! It's the kid! Help! He's got Delmar. God-dam you, help, help!"

And, in answer to that wild appeal, a tumult of voices roared in the lower portion of the house. Heavy footfalls began to thunder on stairs. A gun exploded; it sounded to Philip like the hoarse bark of a dog that would soon leap on his back and tear the life from his body.

"You see?" gasped Jolly, as the boy stumbled hastily on across the roof. "You see? You can't do anything. That Mac—he spit out the gag. Damn him! You should of cut their throats! Leave me be! Leave me lie here! I'll tell you—the mine's up in the—"

"Be still! Be still!" said Philip, trembling terribly

as he felt temptation grip him. For, after all, how simple it would be to let this inert burden fall and to speed away, light as the wind! He had done enough to strike men with wonder, so it seemed, merely by that exploit of reaching the house and striking, or trying to strike, a single blow. He would not have to make excuses.

That bitter temptation weakened him, as liquor weakens the brain and makes it spin and slide into the easier ways.

But it was the loose feebleness of those arms around his neck that made him cling to his purpose and—far off—a thought of Maizie, like a fragrance that floated across the night.

He reached the tank. Jolly could stay himself against it, while Philip swung to the top of it and then drew Jolly up after him, poor young Delmar gritting his teeth to keep back the complaint.

Down the ladder, then, on the farther side, and so to the dreadful bridge which lay between him and some hope of escape. The pipe looked as thin as a thread—a thread of silk! But necessity swelled big in Philip, and drove him on.

"You can't do it!" gasped Jolly. "It won't hold. We'll—we'll drop—"

"Hold on as tight as you can, will you?" said Philip. "Hold hard around my neck!"

And as he spoke, he sank his teeth in the coat of Jolly, gripped him with his legs, and dropped all his weight and the weight of that helpless body with which he was burdened, upon his arms.

He began to go hand over hand along the pipe. He had to swing himself forward, a little, and with every change of grip, all the weight came on one hand. He could hear the breath of Jolly gulped at his ear, as though the wounded man were drinking in great swallows.

It had been so easy to come across, carrying his own weight, that he had not noticed that the pipe was wet, but loaded with their extra burden, that wetness made his fingers uncertain in his grip. Twice he felt his fingers slide a fatal bit, and each time his heart jumped into his throat and choked him with its mad hammering.

"I can't hold on," said Jolly suddenly. "God, Phil—I—I'm faintin'! The mine—"

His arms loosened and dragged down from the shoulders of the boy. Still, with his teeth fixed, like the teeth of a wolf, Philip held that weight, and with his twined legs he supported it.

At the same time, he heard the flood of noise which had been rushing through the house, roar into the top-most story. Out of the corridor it burst upon the roof like the blast of harsh music from a hunting horn.

And he was the prey they sought.

His bowed head, strained down by the limp weight of his burden, made him look into the dizzy shadows beneath and, far, far beneath, miles beneath him, he saw a flat, glimmering streak of water. There he would strike if he fell!

And then his hand touched wood—a crossbeam of the frame!

It was better than the touch of the hand of any friend, a yielding, soft thing, that wood, compared to the iron of the pipe! He fumbled with it. At least, he had both hands free, and the passage of the greater danger gave him a wilder burst of strength.

He swung around the crossbeam, reached the ladder, and clung against it for an instant, gasping deep breaths, snapping at the air, like a wolf at meat.

Jolly Delmar groaned.

"My God, we ain't dead!

"You're going to get through it. The worst part's over. Try to hold around my neck for a minute, Jolly!"

"You got across!" mumbled Jolly. "You got across!"

And he struggled his arms into place. His head sagged down beside that of Philip, and the touch of his face was hot with fever.

Going down was easy—wonderfully easy. Only, it seemed impossible to move rapidly enough! All his movement seemed clogged and stupidly slow.

And above, the yelling voices, like the cry of a pack, broke at last from the hall of the upper story and rushed out bodily on to the roof. Feet stamped. There seemed a dozen men up there.

Still lowering away—but with a sense of the ground a bitter distance beneath his feet—Philip looked up, and there he saw forms looming high above the little parapet of the roof—all outlined with amazing clearness because of the stars which burned above them, or the radiance which poured faintly from the corridor.

More than that, and best of all, someone had brought a lantern, and as he came running, the figures at the parapet seemed to swing back and forth, unstable, light as air.

"It's him!" shouted someone. "Look there! Mac was right! Look there! Down the ladder of the windmill. See him! He's got Delmar in his arms!"

The crash of three or four guns drowned any answer. One bullet sang at the ear of Philip; one smashed the cross bar he was holding, and he slipped down with a violent jerk.

He never could reach the ground without some respite. He jerked out a Colt, swung a little to one side, and out from the ladder, and setting his teeth, he fired at one of those dancing silhouettes.

He saw his man pitch back; every other form at the same instant ducked out of sight.

And as he cast the revolver away and resumed the descent, he heard a voice screaming:

"He's got me. Sam! He's got me! Sam, I ain't gunna die. Sam, don' you let me die. I dun wanna die, Sam! God! God! I'm gunna die!"

Other guns were barking at him, but he was farther away. The shadows were closing over him, and every bullet sang wide. Then his feet touched the ground, and he could turn with Loafer whining with joy before him, firm footing, a drawn revolver in his right hand, Jolly supported in the crook of his left arm.

He was ready for battle now!

And he ran forward, swinging Jolly lightly in the might of his arm, and plunging for the trees.

He broke across the clearing. He crashed through a line of brush. And now he was running down the side of the roadway.

Once and again, like a vast firefly, a gun flashed from a thick clump of brush just before him. He leaped to the side, firing in return, but he had no real target—only a sense of where the flashes had come from.

The gun spoke again. It was like a thin ray of red reaching at him, and this time he felt a slash of pain across the back of his shoulder.

It seemed that having passed through those colossal dangers he was to be beaten down at the last moment by a single enemy. He could have laughed like a madman at the thought, and then he turned to charge straight in at the enemy.

But there was one far fleeter of foot than himself to make that attack. He saw the body of Loafer drive through the brush and the scream of a man followed, sharp and high with horror, mixed with the horrible snarl of the wolf.

"Loafer! Back!" shouted Philip, half sick.

There was an instant noise of crashing through the brush, as that guard fled, cursing and groaning, and Loafer leaped back into the roadway, and Philip saw even by starlight the flash of his grin of happiness.

At last he had struck one blow for his master!

CHAPTER XXXVI

THERE is no burden so clumsy to carry as that of a helpless man. Had an equal weight in a sack of wheat, say, been loaded upon the shoulders of Philip, he could have sprinted away with little hindrance. But even his power of arm began to relax, and his breath came in great, whistling gasps. Behind him, he heard distant voices shouting, and then the squealing of horses.

They would be after him like a river in flood, and not only from behind—straight ahead he heard the beating of hoofs, and round the next bend in the driveway came two mustangs, running hard.

In his heat and weariness, he poised a revolver, half determined to shoot down these charging cavaliers rather than evade them in the woods, but then he heard a voice calling: "Phil! Phil!"

He stopped, amazed.

"Here, Doc!" he answered.

Rivers brought up the two horses with a groan of nervous joy.

"I got you, Phil. Now, thank God! I been riding in hell, coming up this here road between the trees. I started when I heard the shooting. What have you got there?"

He was on the ground instantly. Together they

lifted the sick man to the back of Rivers' own horse. He would be better there, for Philip was so much heavier than either of his companions that he would have to have a horse to himself.

Not a word did Rivers speak. He was no hero, and Philip heard the gritting of his teeth as he mastered his fear sternly. He could begin to see that it had cost the spirit of Doc Rivers as much to bring the horses up the shadowy dangers of that driveway as it had cost Philip himself to actually invade the house of the enemy and bring away the captive.

In silence they secured Jolly Delmar, who sat with both hands wrapped in the mane of the horse and his head bowed. He, also, said not a word of protest, though Philip knew that he must be suffering agonies from the chafing of his legs against the horse.

Then they galloped the horses down the drive, and the rattling hoofs beat with less noise, at last, as they left the trees.

A shallow draw opened a hundred yards or so to the right and towards this Doc Rivers turned. Philip followed obediently. In such a time as this, he knew that Rivers was a far better general than he. If only they could reach the shelter of the draw in time!

The starlight which, a short moment before, had seemed so dim and useless, now appeared as brilliant as the light of a sun, and Philip rode with his head turned over his shoulder, watching the mouth of the driveway. He could hear the riders roaring down the road inside the trees of the Purchass place. No doubt they were driven on by the promise of mighty

rewards, if they should succeed, and above all, they would ride and fight like madmen for the sheer game of the thing, and for the pleasure of hunting down the fugitives.

But still, miraculously, they did not issue from the grove into the open, and now the two horses dropped into the draw. When they sat erect, they could see the Purchass place clearly. When they leaned far over, the bank was high enough to cover them. Even that shelter would be of little use if the pursuers, halting to listen, should wait to hear the beat of the hoofs of the two horses.

The draw deepened. It was no longer possible to look back at the enemy, and all they could do was to hurry their horses forward. And every moment, Philip expected guns to open from the bank at their left, or to hear the rush of many horses behind them, coming straight up the draw.

However, the bottom of the draw was sandy, not too soft for running, and Rivers' mustang, in spite of his double burden, ran straightaway for two or three minutes like the wind, to a place where a grove of poplars dipped over the side of the gully. Into that, without hesitation, Rivers drove his horse, and when fairly into the screen of the trees, he drew rein a little.

"I'm going to jog on," he said. "Go back to the edge of the woods. Look out and see what's happening, if you can. Then come after me. I'm heading straight up towards those two high hills with the forest between them."

Philip swung back, obediently, to the verge of the

trees. And as he reached it, he saw half a dozen riders catapult out of the draw. They drew rein, but the heavy breathing of their horses was audible to Philip. He wondered that they did not hear the panting of his own mount.

"Where away?" asked one.

"I dunno. Where's the chief?"

"He ain't with us."

"A couple of you beat up the woods, here. The rest of us'll—"

"Two of us go alone after that hyena? Are you nutty, Bud?"

"Come on, then, we'll all go after 'em. Ride like hell! He's got a wounded man on his hands. We ought to catch him if he came this way. If we don't catch him, we never can go home. The old man will be ravin' crazy!"

And they drove their horses forward into the trees.

Philip, when he heard the crashing of that noise, edged his own mount to the edge of the woods. There he had open running, and he galloped hard along the verge of the woods, trusting to blind chance that no other roaming riders might spot him as he hurried in the open.

He had not gone half a mile when he saw a horse with two dim shadows on its back emerge from the trees—a moment later he was beside Doc Rivers.

To his astonishment, both Rivers and Jolly Delmar were in high spirits.

"They went by us through the trees like thunder.

laughed Doc Rivers. "We're gunna give these birds the go-by, kid. We're gunna make fools of them."

"How are you, Jolly?" asked the boy.

"I'm doin' fine, kid. The gallop sort of waked my blood up. My legs give me hell; but anything's better than that hell-hole back yonder!"

"Can you ride by yourself?"

"I can, if we had a third horse."

"Take this one. I'll walk for a while."

"You stay put on that horse!" exclaimed Jolly and Doc in one voice, and Rivers added that they were doing very well under their present arrangement.

However, Philip insisted. He felt reasonably sure that the danger could not have been ended so quickly. The Colonel—to say nothing of all those famous riders of the Purchass clan—was not a man to be thrown off a trail quickly and easily. And, before long, he was apt to come back at them, when least expected. If that time arrived, then they would need fresh horses, assuredly. So he lifted Jolly Delmar on to the back of his own horse, and he himself jogged quietly forward. All his life he had been accustomed to strenuous marches through the mountains, always up sharp slopes or down steep pitches, picking his way among fallen trees, through brush, scattered stones, rolling pebbles, so that over such going as this he felt perfectly at home.

Easily and smoothly he kept on his way, and the horses had to jog steadily to keep up with him. His main point of concern was Jolly, and whether his strength would last. But in fact, every moment in

the open seemed to raise the spirits of Jolly higher. He was forgetting his pain.

Now and again they paused. They were climbing out of the valley and getting among the hills, and they halted again and again so that they might try to hear what did not come to their eyes.

In one of those pauses, Doc Rivers pressed Jolly to say something about his experience in the Purchass house, but Jolly put him off, with a groan at the mere memory.

And then the moon rose into an unclouded sky, and robbed them of their sense of security. It was almost as bright as the sun, and as it rose higher and higher, they could find fewer shadows in which to ride.

They kept busily on the lookout, but still there was no sign of the enemy. They crossed a shallow valley among the hills, with willows growing in the flat of the hollow. The wet ground took something from their laboring mustangs, and Philip came out on the other side clogged and weighted with mud. From the next height, they looked down along a great, gradual slope, with groves of huge pines and magnificent spruce scattered across it.

"Once we get inside of those trees, the devil himself can't find us!" said Doc Rivers with confidence.

They rode on in haste, therefore, so much so that Philip fell a good deal behind, and at the verge of the trees he glanced back and saw the thing which he had been dreading.

Half a dozen shadowy forms were sweeping under the side of the mountain, driving straight down to-

wards the fugitives. They came out into the shallower slope, and the moon flashing on their sweating horses made them look like metal monsters.

Philip ran on, shouting, and presently he came up with the fugitives. He caught the stirrup leather at the side of Jolly Delmar.

"They're right after us," he said. "Ride for it, boys. I'll hang on to the stirrup leather!"

They began a wild dash through the woods with Doc Rivers well in the lead, to show the way. Philip would have been inclined to dodge constantly from one side to the other, striving to twist away from their pursuers, but Rivers would not do that. He only made two turns, each time slipping into narrow gaps between the trees, then driving ahead.

Moreover, he stopped several times, letting the horses drift ahead. In that manner he could listen, and they heard the crash of the pursuit swinging here and there behind them.

Apparently the hunters were driving along quite wildly and at random, and the noise of their riding faded farther and farther behind.

So Philip, badly winded, his head a blur from his frantic dashes at the side of the galloping mustang which Jolly Delmar bestrode, found that they were crossing a wide clearing between forest and forest, and looking back as they entered a long, clear avenue on the farther side, he saw a horseman come out behind them from darkness to light, a giant horseman on a giant horse, charging swiftly forward.

Without a word, he leaped up behind Jolly. And without a word Jolly and Doc put their horses to full speed. The Colonel was after them at last!

CHAPTER XXXVII

THEY had not gone far before Philip realized that there was no escape. The giant behind them came fast, for he was so mightily mounted that even his enormous bulk did not seem to check the speed of his horse. Doc Rivers' mount was a poor one, and the other nag was carrying double.

Meantime, they were riding through a very open wood with the trees silver-flashing under the breadth and the brightness of the moon, and the ground splashed with jet black shadows. They could not expect to keep away from the Colonel very long in such quarters as these, and they could not expect to dodge him.

But they were two to one!

He had no sooner said it to himself than a gun clanged behind them, and the horse of Rivers dropped on its head and turned completely over, shooting poor Doc far out in front, where he rolled like a top.

There were even odds, now. Worse than even, for here was Jolly on his hands!

Poor Jolly was in a frightful state of mind.

"We'd better pull up!" he kept repeating. "It's the Colonel, kid. It's the Colonel. There's no use fighting. Nobody could beat him. No ten men could beat him! He's a devil. He's ten devils!"

He drew rein as he spoke, and Philip looked anxiously back. They were twisting, for the moment, around a curve of that natural roadway through the woods, and the Colonel was shut from view. He looked to the front again—and behold, a great branch swayed down above him.

He did not stop for the second thought but followed the first, reaching high and grappling the limb. It sagged only a little under his weight, and as he was jerked high from the saddle he gasped: "Ride, Jolly! Ride!"

In an instant he was stretched along the bough and saw Loafer sitting beneath, his red tongue lolling.

"Go ahead, Loafer!" he called, and waved. Loafer instantly cantered on.

And now he could see the Colonel coming. He looked to Philip even more magnificent than he had seemed when dashing across the ridge of the mountain the day before. The same cloak fluttered back from his shoulders in long, sweeping lines. The brim of his hat was furled by the speed of his horse. And he sat tall and straight in the saddle, one hand for the reins, one hand balancing a revolver for a second shot.

That second shot must not be fired!

And snatching out a gun, Philip aimed through the twigs at the charging giant.

He could not fire. It was such a target as any child could have hit, but he would not, or could not release the hammer—and here was the Colonel sweeping

closer, a scant stride away, the revolver tipping down for the shot—

There had been no forethought in Philip's mind. He merely had planned to rid the horse of the double burden and thus, perhaps, give poor Jolly a chance for his life. He had not hoped to give himself ambush to fire upon the Colonel. Certainly he had not planned on what he now did. But the thought exploded in his brain like the leap of an electric spark, and he hurled himself down from the branch.

Like a panther leaping, with more than a panther's weight he crashed against the Colonel and the speed of the horse knocked both men out of the saddle. Philip, blinded and stunned by the shock, prayed vaguely that he might be able to fall clear of the big man, and that prayer was more than answered. For the Colonel landed heavily on his side and Philip's impact on the ground was broken by the body of the Colonel himself.

Philip, reeling, gasping, hardly able to realize what he had done, dragged himself to his knees and hands and saw the Colonel lying flattened against the ground, his enormous arms thrown out crosswise.

That sight inspired him. It cleared his mind and set a fierce light of joy in his eyes, so that he leaped up at once and ran lightly to the fallen man. One revolver lay far away, gleaming in the moonshine. The second one was even now in the hand of the monster—so instinctively had he acted even in that instant of crisis!

That gun Philip, stooping, snatched away, fumbled

at the body of the big man to find another weapon, if possible—and instantly was taken by the throat!

It was as though vast levers had caught him. Crimson flames shot through his head, and he struck half blindly for the face of the Colonel.

His fist struck something—the hand relaxed from his throat—and Philip stumbled back to his feet, still dizzy from the paralyzing effect of that grasp. Through the shadows of his half-stunned mind, he saw the monster lurch upwards.

Like a tree the Colonel loomed before him, and then rushed in, with arms extended, eager, with the certainty of a rushing avalanche. There was no hope in Philip, but the vast energy which despair gives. He could not flee; the rush of the Colonel was as inescapable as the swooping of a bird—or so it seemed. So Philip slid suddenly forward, dipped his head, and then smote upwards at the beard of the giant—smote with all the sway of his body, and the lift of his muscles, and the speed and power of hand and shoulder behind that blow.

There was a shock, as though he had smitten a crag of stone. All his arm went numb, and electric pangs raced up and down from wrist to shoulder; but the Colonel's rush had ended.

Ay, incredible though it seemed, the whole vast bulk of the man rocked back upon his heels, and his arms fell helplessly to his sides. He had been knocked out of his stride—knocked almost flat on the ground, and by a single blow!

A shadow came skimming like a bird, a great dark bird, along the ground.

"Keep back, Loafer!" called the boy. "Keep back, Loafer! I—I don't need you!"

And he leaped in headlong at the mighty form, for he felt that the giant was effectually stunned, and that another blow might send him down. Eagerness nearly ended the life of Philip in that instant. Something as huge as a beam, weighty as a log, swift as a striking cat, darted out at him. He threw up his guard. It beat down his arm, and struck through on his breast with such an impact that Philip was literally picked up and hurled back.

He fell on his hands and one knee, vaguely saw the monster lunge towards him, and then gained miraculous strength to spring up and to the side.

Almost he was clear of that sweeping danger, but not quite. The next instant, as a man is caught by a whirlpool, so Philip was clutched by the giant, and they stood breast to breast. The great arms went around him; instinctively he clasped a barrel as vast and as hard as the trunk of a tree, and put forth his might.

As he had lifted at the black rock, so he strained now, desperately. He had labored, on that day, for the life of a dog, and next for the pride of his heart. Now he had the added might of terror.

Around him were cast arms which contrasted with the power of steel bands, red hot and shrinking into place. The flesh was ground against his bones. The same red flames of agony leaped into his brain, but

even in that misery it seemed to him that the huge body of the Colonel was not so rigid, that it gave a little—ay, it undoubtedly yielded, and he heard the half gasp, half groan of exhaled breath.

The crushing grip of the Colonel was abandoned. He swayed up a hand like the head of a sixteen-pound sledge and Philip saw that danger swayed darkly above him. He pressed his face into the shoulder of the monster; the blow glanced from his head, and heaving then with all his might, he lifted the massive bulk to a tottering uncertainty, and then tipped it—swayed again, and pitched it to the ground, himself drawn down in the fall.

He could hold the monster down no more than he could control a struggling bear. They stood on their feet again, a little distance between them. The breath of Philip came and went rapidly, but he heard a hoarse gasping from the Colonel, and it seemed to Philip the sweetest music that ever had sounded in his ear.

“Boy,” said the Colonel, “I love courage when I find it. You are young. You will grow into a man worthy of the name. On this one night I let you escape from me. You may go! But if we meet again—”

“This is the first time and the last,” said Philip, peering at that contorted face. “I’ve met you fairly, hand to hand, and I’ve mastered you. And I’ll take you back and show you to my friends like a tame dog on a rope.”

He sprang in. Those huge arms rose to strike but there was a glory of confidence in the heart of Philip,

now. It made him light as a feather to whirl between those driving blows and strike again, and again.

The Colonel went reeling back under the shadow of the nearest tree, and as Philip followed with tigerish haste, he heard the rending of wood.

There was a small limb that thrust out from the trunk of the tree. It had failed to mature like an honest bough. Stunted, half dead, leafless and twigless, it stuck out like a spur from the body of the tree, and this the Colonel had grasped and torn away with desperate strength.

Philip saw the danger and strove to dodge it, but the blow beat down his arm and fell on his head; and an explosion of blackness covered his brain as he reeled away. He found himself staggering helplessly, as though he walked in deep mud, and there was a deadly weakness behind his knees, threatening to make him fall.

He heard the sudden clangor of a gun, a voice shouting that seemed the voice of Doc Rivers, and then he could see.

It was Doc Rivers indeed, running forward, and still calling out, but the monster form of the Colonel no longer was before him. Instead, there was a sharp whistle from somewhere in the brush, and then Philip saw the horse of the giant gallop into the woods in answer to the signal of its master.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HE was bewildered both physically and mentally by the disappearance of the monster and by that crushing blow which had fallen on his head. A foul blow, it first seemed to Philip. For surely, after he himself had failed to take advantage of a helplessly prostrate foe, it seemed that the latter might at least have fought out the battle fairly, hand to hand. As it was, Doc Rivers undoubtedly had saved his life, for the giant, rushing in, might have shattered his skull like an egg-shell at the next stroke. The whistling bullets which Doc fired had put the Colonel to flight.

And suddenly it seemed that their work was done. With the Colonel removed from the fight, beaten, even all the myrmidons of the Purchass clan seemed a mere nothing.

Doc Rivers fairly embraced Philip.

Then he stood back, dancing grotesquely in the moonlight. Doc himself had been badly mauled in the fall of his horse. Blood was caked with dust down one side of his face, his coat was rent from shoulder to waist, and he limped as he danced. Nevertheless his thought was not for himself.

"I seen you knocking him before you. It was the Colonel, kid! It was the Colonel! There ain't anybody else as big as that in the whole world!"

"It was the Colonel," repeated Philip slowly, for he himself hardly could realize the miracle of his own strength as it had been revealed on this night. The glory of the lifting of the Black Rock was drowned and lost in this blaze of triumph. So he repeated slowly: "It was the Colonel!"

"Sweet—sufferin'—mama!" gasped Doc Rivers.

He added: "Your hands, kid? You was only usin' your hands?"

"I was only using my hands," answered Philip. And then a wave of savage anger and exultation, commingled, passed over him. "And when I meet him again," he said, "I'm going to tie him up and lead him home like a tame dog, to show to the people!"

He remembered, he had told the Colonel that. He would tell him again, when they next encountered. But they never would fight hand to hand again, he could guess. Not if the Colonel could leave the decision to weapons!

But even with weapons, Philip no longer feared the giant. He had tested him and found him wanting; now with rifle or revolver he would take his chance with the Colonel day or night, sun or shadow!

Now it seemed to Philip as though that dreadful encounter in the moonlight at last had cleared a cloud from his brain. There was a great cut on his head; from it blood trickled down, and the salt taste of it was in his mouth as he spoke.

"We've got to find Jolly," he said. "Can he last out the trip home?"

"Unless they've blocked him off," answered Doc

Rivers. "He'll sure last it out unless they've blocked him away on the road home. It ain't so far off, now!"

"Hurry!" said Philip. "We've got to run!"

And run he did, swinging steadily forward through the woodland ways until Doc Rivers staggered and stopped. He leaned a hand against a sapling and gasped for breath.

"I can't run another step," he declared.

Impatient anger flared in Philip. He made a step closer.

"You have to," he said. "You have to run on, Doc!"

Doc Rivers mopped his brow.

"Don't threaten me, kid," he said. "I've done my best. I ain't an iron man, like you. I'm human, thank God. Let's walk. Even running, we couldn't catch up with a horse!"

No doubt there was some sense in this, and Philip walked impatiently on through the woods. Even then he set a pace which Rivers hardly could follow, though the latter broke repeatedly into a dogtrot, and then begged his companion to slow down and go more easily. But Philip was relentless and they pushed on at an even, heart-breaking pace.

They left the woods, at last; they turned on to the highway, and a voice called suddenly to them from the shadows—Jolly Delmar rode out into the moonlight to them.

"What happened?" he cried. "I came on and waited here. I couldn't go any farther. I should have turned back quicker and tried to help—but boys,

I didn't dare to. I was more scared of being taken back to the Purchass place than I'm scared of hell-fire. Kid, you forgive me? But it wasn't the Colonel, after all?"

"Jolly," answered Doc Rivers, solemnly, "it was the Colonel, and the Colonel is busted."

Jolly gaped.

"He ain't so much as a major or even a captain. He's only a doggone private!"

"How come?" asked Jolly, in a voice that shook with excitement.

"Me, with my own eyes," said Doc Rivers, "I seen the kid back the Colonel into a tree. You could hear the thudding of his fists clear over here, if you'd cocked an ear to listen. He was dodging the Colonel's fists and whanging him—it was somethin' to see. You wouldn't believe it, otherwise. Then the Colonel peeled a branch off of the tree—"

"Hold on!" said Jolly.

"I seen it, you fool! With that branch he hammered the kid over the head and stunned him. God brought me along, just then, and I turned loose with a gun, and the Colonel turned and run. He was beat. He was fair beat. I seen it. I'll swear to it!"

"I know what I know, too," replied Jolly, "and I believe it. And now, Phil, we got 'em spread out and helpless. The Colonel and the whole damn Purchass gang is beat hollow. After this, we begin to collect. We begin to get fat!"

And he laughed like a boy.

There might have been ten thousand enemies lurk-

ing in the woods; but they would not have cared. They went on talking loudly. Jolly, forgetful of pain and weakness, even began to sing, and so they topped the last hill and saw in the hollow beneath them the well-remembered outline of the Delmar place.

Doc Rivers halted and leaned wearily on the massive shoulder of Philip.

"When was it that we started out, kid?" said he. "Was it about fifty years ago, maybe? Was it about that time that we went over and seen the Colonel?"

He sighed.

"You've made an old man of me, kid," said he. "Damned if you ain't piled a stack of years onto my shoulders!"

And they went happily down the slope towards the house. They entered the yard. They turned to the back, and the broad, thin shaft of light from the kitchen window poured out.

"It's Dad," guessed Jolly. "Won't have slept much since I left! Sneak up soft, and we'll see!"

They assisted Jolly from the horse. He could sit the saddle well enough, but he could walk hardly a step, and Philip picked him up and carried him to the window. Looking through it, they saw old Delmar bowed over the kitchen table, his head in his folded arms.

They were able to open the door and half cross the floor before he started up, and Philip never would forget how those long, lean arms were thrown out to welcome his son.

He carried Jolly through the dining room amid a

rain of questions, hasty answers. Everyone was talking at once.

In the hall a small white cyclone descended—Maizie in a white dressing gown, with flying hair, and so they completed the progress to Jolly's room. There, while Maizie hastily prepared food, the three men undressed Jolly and removed the wrappings from his legs. What they saw made them turn white.

Tenderly they bathed that bruised and torn flesh, and Doc Rivers, who knew about such things, laid on the bandages.

"Hell!" said old Delmar suddenly. "That's where they'll all go; that's where they've all come from!"

At last they had Jolly settled in the bed as Maizie rattled in with a tray covered with edibles. Jolly, exhausted but joyous, lay back, propped high with pillows.

"I'm not gunna talk. I'm not gunna tell you anything tonight," he said. "I'm just gunna be happy and enjoy lookin' at you. Only, before I'm a minute older, I'm gunna tell you where the vein is."

Philip, instinctively, stepped to the window, and stood there with a hand on the butt of his revolver, for it seemed to him that the word which had been so many times on the verge of being told was now sure to be interrupted, and interrupted with dangerous force.

There was nothing but the naked moonlight in the back yard beneath him; though it seemed to Philip that a ghost of Jolly and the two horses once more passed beneath and disappeared down the roadway.

He heard Jolly's voice telling the tale briefly. Just what the details were, Philip could not understand, but the names of creeks and hills and mountains were all familiar to the other listeners.

After that, Jolly's supper proceeded merrily. Maizie and his father remained to feed him and take care of him. Philip and Doc Rivers, starved with their long fast, went down to the kitchen to cook their own supper.

They had fried ham and eggs and laid out the platter with steaming coffee and chunks of hard bread. They had washed grime and blood from their faces as well as they could, and they were about to sit down to the table when Maizie came in to them. She went up to Philip with a face as pale as her dressing gown.

"Jolly's told us," she said. "Jolly's told us everything. I'm trying to believe it. But my head swims! I—I saw the shoulder of his coat—where your teeth had cut through the cloth."

"Doc," said Philip, "you step outside for a minute."

Doc Rivers silently vanished from the room, and Philip stood above the girl. She was no longer a dreadfully mysterious creature to him; she was only a pale and slender child.

"When I left," he said, "we had a sort of agreement, Maizie."

Her eyes half closed.

"I know. I'd never go back on it, Phil."

He found that his words were snapping out, sharp and hard.

"D'you say that because you care a lot for me, Maizie, or because you're afraid of me?"

Her eyes closed altogether, at that; she grew whiter than before, and when she looked up at him again, he could see the naked terror in her soul.

"I don't know," said Maizie.

But Philip knew, and all the joy and the glory of that night was snatched away from him like a robe of gold, and he was left clothed in tatters.

"We go back to the beginning," said Philip, then, "as if we'd never said a word to one another. Is that better?"

"Are you angry? Are you hating me?" asked Maizie.

When he saw her grip the back of a chair and sway back a little, a touch of pity came to Philip for her, but he was hard and cold in his heart of hearts.

"Let's talk facts," said he. "I'm beginning to see facts. The other day I was still a young fool. Well, Maizie, I've grown up. You know the story about Midas and the touch of gold. There's the touch of steel, too. I think that I've had that touch on me. At any rate, I can look through a good deal. When you first found me, Maizie, you saw that I was quite young and quite a fool. Is that right?"

Her lips stirred, as though she were trying to answer, but no answer came; and her eyes wavered on his face, as though she were reading a large and crowded page.

"I'm sorry that I put it as a question," said Philip. "It's simply a fact. Of course I was ridiculous, but

you thought that I might be useful. That night among the trees you were drawing me on. You saw that I'd lost my head about you, and you wanted to make sure of me. Am I right?"

"Phil," she began.

He waited, but she could not speak.

"You had your job for me. It was to bring back Jolly. Well, I've brought him back twice. You'd thrown out a sort of bait for me. Not in words. We were too delicate for that. Only a hint between us—I would have you, if you had back Jolly. Is that right?"

She drew a long breath; he felt that she was fighting hard, merely to face him, merely to stand before him.

"As a matter of fact, there's some other fellow, of course. You picked me up because you needed me. Don't look so scared, Maizie. I'll never harm you. And the truth—you ought to be able to stand that. You see that I come down to a simple thing, in the end. I let you off the bargain, Maizie. And here's my hand on it!"

He held forth his hand. Her own dropped limply into it, and suddenly her lip trembled and tears poured into her eyes.

Philip half turned from her.

"I don't want to see you cry, Maizie," said he. "I think I'd really despise you, if I did!"

And, when he looked again, she was gone without a sound—only a whisper was in the hall and then, on the stairs, a faint murmur of a stifled sob. The lip of Philip curled, and stepping to the back door, he threw

it open, and called Doc Rivers in. The latter came, shivering from the cold.

"Damn it, kid," said he, "you've kept us so long, the steam's off the coffee! What's the matter? You and Maizie have a falling out?"

"On the contrary," said Philip. "We've just had an understanding!"

"Oh," murmured Doc Rivers, and suddenly busied himself with his food.

And it seemed to Philip that, like Maizie, Doc Rivers was overcome with fear. Every movement, indeed, was furtive.

CHAPTER XXXIX

EARLY the next morning they removed to town, with Jolly lying on a mattress in the bottom of the buckboard. Philip sat beside him, partly to care for him, but chiefly as his guard. They felt that once they were safely ensconced in the town, they could shrug their shoulders at the Purchass clan. The sheriff and the law would receive them, and as for Jolly's danger from the law, that was something no longer to be feared. With the money from the mine they could hire such lawyers as would maintain his innocence successfully. So thought the Delmars, and in the gray of the dawn they hurried towards the town, old Delmar riding in the rear, and Doc Rivers in the van, riding most dauntlessly and gallantly, while Maizie sat on the driver's seat and put the horses to good speed.

The roads were black and wet with dew, and the fields were glistening gray, for the pale gold had been fading rapidly, as harvest fields will do. There was a good, cheerful feeling in the air, a chill that heartened one and brought color into the face.

Philip marked down these details without emotion, as one jots down notes on a pad of paper. He felt detached. He was a mere observer. Jolly, Maizie, they both lived in this world. So did old Delmar. So did even Doc Rivers. What the difference was, Philip

began to guess. They had families. They came out of a known past. They were rooted in facts. But he was a plant that had grown in the air, so to speak. It had no relation to society and therefore society would have nothing to do with him. He was held off at arm's length.

The light freshened to pink and bright rose. Maizie was talking from time to time, and when the sun rose, Jolly had the pillows heaped higher under his head. He wanted to look that sun in the face, he declared, for he had felt, the night before, that he never would see the warm, kind, honest, cheerful sun again.

So Philip propped him higher, and then Jolly began to talk about the mystery of his disappearance from the house. He had gone up to the map and was removing the thumb tacks with which it was pressed into the wall; they had rusted in their places, and he had to pry them out, carefully, with his knife blade. He had three of them out, he remembered, when he felt something behind him; like a chill striking in from the window, Jolly said it was.

Finally he turned around, and he was amazed and oddly shocked to see Sheldon standing inside the window, looking steadily at him. He asked Sheldon what he wanted, and Sheldon said that he had come to speak about leaving.

"Leave if you want to," said Jolly impatiently. "I'm busy with something else. You talk over your wages with Dad!"

"You'd better talk to me," said Sheldon in a queer

voice, and Jolly looked at him carefully, in some alarm and in some curiosity.

Sheldon had always been the quietest sort of a man, but now there was a touch of danger in him. Jolly said that it was hard to define. Certainly the eyes of the little man were fascinating. They had changed. They had grown very dark, and they looked flat and black—

“Like black velvet?” put in Philip.

“Just exactly like that,” exclaimed Jolly. “How did you guess that?”

He went on to say that Sheldon had repeated several times: “I want to talk about leaving the house. You’d better talk with me about it. You’d better talk about leaving it, yourself. Do you hear? You’d better talk about leaving it yourself!”

This he repeated over and over in a monotonous voice and all the time Jolly was staring into the face of the puncher until all at once he felt himself growing rather dizzy. Thereafter he was not sure of exactly what had happened, except that Sheldon began to speak about the horses, too. And that he kept saying: “It would be a good thing, when you leave, to ride those horses back to the Purchass place. They’d be glad to see you, there! You’d better ride the horses over. Over to the Purchass place. Do you hear? You’re going to ride them over to the Purchass place.”

This thought had filled Jolly with horror. But he felt himself impelled by resistless power, and after that, his mind was completely a blank except for two moments.

One was when he walked through the dining room and wanted with all his might to call out for help, and to beg the people to catch him and keep him from going; but he found that his lips were locked. The next moment was when he heard the voice from the window of his own room calling to him. It had not seemed like another person speaking. It had seemed like his own ghost standing up there above him, and calling to him to come back. But again he dared not answer. And a strange wonder came to him. Was it really he who sat on the Purchass horse? Or was it his ghost, while the real Jolly Delmar remained in the house? Then he remembered nothing, except that the senses which had been stolen from him returned, and he found himself in the Purchass house itself, with armed men all around him, and the devilish face of old Purchass himself before him.

He was lying on a cot, the same cot where Philip finally had found him, and little Sheldon was leaning over him, with the same eyes of black velvet.

He had wakened totally in the hands of his enemy, and Purchass, inside the first minute, had placed his proposal before Jolly.

He would give that youth his life and forget about the death of the young Purchass whose loss had caused the feud. In return, Jolly was to hand over information about the location of the mine. How the Purchass outfit had learned about it, Jolly never knew. At any rate, he told them gravely that he would far rather die. Then old Purchass had the others tie

Jolly down on the bed and he himself remained alone with him.

"To bring him to reason," as he said.

There followed a torture so dreadful that Jolly confessed he had screamed like a woman, and the old satyr had laughed in his face and told him that he would tear him to shreds unless the secret were revealed.

Shortly afterwards, Jolly fainted, and that saved him further agony for some hours. But again and again he was put under pressure. Until, the day before, when he was on the verge of surrendering beneath this mortal agony, the enormous form of the Colonel had burst into the room.

He had taken old Purchass by the back of the neck as one might lift a terrier and told him that he would throw him through the window unless this hellishness ceased at once. Old Purchass had snarled an answer, but he had submitted and allowed himself to be taken from the room.

The last of that argument, Philip himself had overheard on the roof of the house.

Now when Jolly had made an end of his story, they came out of the woods, made a sharp turn, and the town was before them, in the full brightness of the midmorning sun.

CHAPTER XL

PHILIP became all eyes.

This was at last the great goal of his ambition; this was the seat of those lovely stars which he had seen from the height of Pillar Mountain on clear nights. But what he found revealed to him had not a shred of glory attached. It was simply a shambling, wide-spread, broken-down mountain town, so cheaply constructed that every building was old before it reached its third year. He felt that he could have blown down the general merchandise store with a huff and a puff. And as for the widespreading hotel, he was sure that he could have kicked his way through its flimsy walls.

There was little paint; there was much dust; there was in every vacant lot a jumble of junk, rusted wire, barrel bands, broken wheels; chickens scratched up the front yards and dusted themselves in holes which they had scratched in the grass-plots. Dogs ran out and barked furiously at the riders and the buckboard. Slatternly women came and leaned in doorways, arms akimbo, and looked after the little procession. And far and near Philip heard the rising of a voice which he never had heard before and, once heard, he never could shake out of his consciousness: and it was composed of the crowing of roosters in the distance and the cackling of hens on their nests, the clanging of a

hammer on a forge, the rattling of kitchen pans, the banging of doors, and the braying laughter of a man somewhere far off, together with other sounds of human voices. Into this jargoning the creaking of stirrup leathers, and the groan of the ill-greased wheels of the buckboard, and the rattling of its loose boards and spokes melted perfectly. It was all a harmony. In spite of its many parts, it was not overloud. Certainly it was not deafening. It was indeed rather a weight upon the spirit than a burden upon the ears.

But Philip did not need to be told what it was. It was the voice of man, which the poet calls "the still, sad music of humanity, nor harsh nor grating."

He remembered that phrase, and he laughed loudly and bitterly. Maizie turned on the driver's seat and glanced sharply back at him, in wonder. It was the first time she had met his eyes that morning, and when he looked boldly back at her, she flashed her glance away to a spotted dog trying to jump a high front fence to come and bark at them.

They reached the hotel and there they put up. Philip carried Jolly into the building and he was shown by the fat proprietor where to take the invalid up the stairs. Old Delmar followed, and said abruptly to the owner: "You send the sheriff word, will you? I got my boy in town, and we want the sheriff to take charge of him. He's got a charge agin Jolly, you know!"

By the time the sheriff came, Maizie and Philip had made Jolly comfortable in his bed, piled pillows

around him, lighted his cigarette. He had a hand on one arm of each of them.

"Lemme have a chance to look you over," he said. "You rest my mind, to look at you. I don't give a damn about anything else. Except Dad. You look to me like you was made of gold and set off with about a million diamonds. You, Maizie—you always was a trump. But Phil, here, that was willin' to die—oh, I know that it wasn't for me! I know that it was for you, Maizie! Why d'you blush so much? Look, Phil, she's all red and embarrassed!"

Philip looked, coldly and curiously. He thought that Maizie was a thousand times more beautiful than she ever had been before, but he took a perverse pleasure in keeping his glance cold and level and direct. He was filled with an enormous power. Nothing could daunt or disturb him. He could cut his heart out of his own breast and hold it in his hand. He could smile or laugh while he hung in flames!

Certainly no one ever should know that this girl had hurt him.

The sheriff came in. He wanted to have the room to himself, Mr. Delmar, and Jolly, while they examined the wounds and talked about how they had been received. Therefore Maizie and Philip went outside. She started to hurry away, but he called her back.

"I want to say a few things," said Philip. "You're embarrassed about me, of course. Jolly and your father and even Doc Rivers seem to think that we're

—er—practically engaged. Shall I tell them that we're not?"

"I don't know," said the girl.

She stepped back until she was pressed against the wall, with her hands flat against it on either side; she was pale and big of eye.

"I wish you wouldn't act that way," said Philip bitterly. "I know that you're not afraid of me. Why do you act that way, Maizie?"

"I don't know," said the girl.

He grew hot with anger. After all, she had seen that she could twist him around her finger, and this affection of simplicity and muteness was a sham that made him rage.

"It won't do," said Philip. "I'm not so simple as this, Maizie. You understand that I don't want to bother you. Just tell me what you want me to do to make things easier for you, and I'll do it."

"Yes," said Maizie.

"But," said Philip, "please let's be open and frank with one another. That's all that I'll ask of you."

To this she said nothing. She had not altered her position. She looked as if she expected him to strike her, and Philip turned on his heel and walked away, angrier than ever.

He went out on the veranda of the hotel and stood with the sun beating against his face. It helped him to confront its burning brightness, for pain kills pain, and the sun for all its power could not reach to the bitter coldness of his heart of hearts.

He wanted to despise Maizie for her wile, her cun-

ning, her clever acting of a part; but instead, he knew that he loved her more than ever. He despised himself, therefore.

Someone lurched from the hotel door with laughter and banged against Philip's back. He had to catch the nearest pillar of the porch to keep from being pitched into the street on his face. He turned and found a huge, red-faced cowpuncher who had been indulging in some horseplay with a pair of companions.

"Don't stand in front of the door, kid, if you want to keep out of trouble," said the big man roughly.

The eye of Philip grew small with a wicked joy. He took the big man by the elbow and the shoulder and flung him across his hip and spinning to the roadway, where he landed flat on his back and the dust spurted out on either side of him like water. He lay still for a moment, then pitched to his feet with a roar and a gun in his hand.

Philip watched him calmly.

"Put up that gun," said he, "or I'll kill you."

The cowpuncher stopped a roar in its midst.

"My God!" he murmured, and dropped the gun back into its holster. Then he disappeared around the corner of the hotel.

Philip, turning, saw that half a dozen had looked on at this byplay. They regarded him now with strained attention, but though they looked at him, not one of them looked into his eyes.

He noted that, and he felt contempt for their weakness. As he approached the door, they split away silently on either side and he walked slowly through

and back up the stairs; behind him he heard a hushed voice say: "Well, that's that!"

He hardly knew what was meant by the speaker; he certainly did not care.

In the upper hall, he was met by old Delmar, who drew him into Jolly's room, saying: "The sheriff's boiling! He says that he'll run the Purchass gang out of the mountains, now. He says that this here outrage is enough to get the people together. And he says that there'll never even be a trial for the shooting of young Purchass. Phil, we're out of the woods! We're out of the woods! The sheriff is going to give us an escort of ten men to get up to the mine and locate it proper! And the game is in our hands!"

Philip found the sheriff in the act of rising from his chair. He came to Philip and shook hands. He, at least, was strong enough to look one in the eye.

"I've met you before," said the sheriff. "I remember. I thought you'd given Dorman a hand. I was wrong. And now, young feller, I've been hearing a lot of amazin' things about you. And I want to tell you a couple of things from my point of view. You keep your ears in and your guns in your clothes and you're gunna be a fine citizen. But if you start runnin' away with yourself, you'll hang before you're much older. I guess that's all. Mind you, I'm your friend, as long as you'll let me be your friend!"

After this rather odd speech, he left the room abruptly, only pausing in the doorway to say:

"I suppose that you feel safe enough here, so long as you got the kid with you?"

"Safer than if I had an army around me," said Jolly happily. "You been damn square with me today, sheriff. I'm never gunna forget it!"

"All right," said the sheriff. "You pay me back by keepin' your strong man under his hat." And he disappeared.

"He didn't seem to like me," said Philip.

"Don't you be scared," said Jolly, reassuringly.

"I'm not," answered Philip.

"But you've been through the mill," said Jolly, "and it's made you like milled steel—a little mite hard, partner. You foller me?"

Philip did not, but he settled down in a chair beside the window and looked across the woods and the rolling of the dark hills towards the heights of Pillar Mountain in the distance. He felt as though twenty years lay between him and his life on Pillar Mountain.

Jolly began to speak again.

"I'll explain about the sheriff," he said. "Of course, the Colonel has been the biggest man in the range for years. Everybody's been afraid of him. And when the sheriff heard that you'd mastered the Colonel, it sort of scared him. Made him afraid that you'd start in where the Colonel had left off. That's why he talked kind of mean to you. But he don't mean no harm."

Philip made no answer. He was beginning to wonder if the sheriff's suspicion might not be correct.

CHAPTER XLI

THINGS moved fast during the rest of that day. Report came in that the Purchass gang had fled from their house; then came word that they intended a covert attack on Jolly and Philip in the town itself.

In the meantime, the sheriff had taken matters into his hands. Philip was left with Jolly; the sheriff with Doc Rivers, old Delmar, and a posse of no fewer than fifteen picked men, rode out to the Purchass house, found it completely deserted except for two youngsters taking care of the horses which remained in the stables, and then the party rode on to locate the vein which Jolly had discovered. It was found, measured, staked by old Delmar, and he and the sheriff returned to the town alone. Every other member of the posse remained on the spot to prospect for other outcroppings of that monstrously rich ore!

Even Doc Rivers, quite out of his head with excitement, disregarding the promise of old Delmar that because of his work in the rescue of Jolly he should have a substantial share in the mine, refused to return. When the sheriff came back to the town that evening, the report went out in all directions; and before morning, half the men of the community had packed their kits and rushed for the mine.

The town was mad with gold-fever. Every event

had been exciting recently. The Purchasses finally had been driven to the bush because of the outrages they had practiced upon Jolly Delmar. And the great Colonel himself had been met, matched, and beaten by an unknown youth who, a little later, had picked up a strong man and thrown him from the veranda of the hotel as another would shy an orange into the street. Such things, together with news of gold, were enough to bring the town up to fever point.

And, twenty-four hours later, the flood returned from the hills with the news that Jolly Delmar's outcrop was the only vein that had been discovered. Old Delmar himself now was on the ground with a force of trained miners, breaking rock. But the rest of the townsmen returned.

They returned, but not to settle down. They were keyed up to a high pitch, as the sheriff very quickly discovered, for three gun fights and an infinite number of promises of more encounters disturbed the citizens. Women began to keep their children indoors, and no man ventured on the streets unless he was loaded with guns. The sheriff in vain tried to bring everyone back to his senses. He interviewed leading men. He organized a standing force of deputies. But still the air was filled with an electric promise of danger. Some great event was expected, and it was to Philip that the particular promise of it came.

He had become a great man overnight. The tale of his adventures had gone abroad from the lips of Doc Rivers. Doc never had had the name of an enthusiastic friend, but his worship of Philip amounted

to idolatry. From his mouth came the story in detail of the crushing of the two Chisholms, and the break through the Purchass lines to get to the Delmar house. From him came, above all, the expedition against the Purchass house. Of part, Rivers was an eyewitness; part he had heard from Philip; part came from Jolly Delmar, and that the most wonderful part of all. There were plenty of temptations for Doc Rivers to talk. Men were willing to set up drinks for the whole house so long as Rivers would narrate the great adventures. Whatever he said was believed, and when whisky colored his vocabulary a little, still he was believed. Above all, men wanted to know again and again how Philip had carried Jolly Delmar from the Purchass place; and again, they listened hushed and keen of eye when they heard of the terrific struggle with the gigantic Colonel. Not one of them but knew that monster, few of them who had not seen some exhibition of his strength, but at last the impossible had happened, and he had been matched and overthrown!

A small bit of evidence they accepted willingly as proof of a great thing. The doubters were reminded how Philip had tossed a grown man and a strong man from the hotel veranda into the street. Indeed, that story was repeated by the victim himself. He was Chuck Harmon, a puncher out of work, and the disgrace of his fall ceased to have a sting when he learned that his conquerer was a sort of mystical hero, and that drinks would be provided when he told about his overthrow. So he told it many times over. He im-

proved on his first versions. He became no more than a feather in the enormous grasp of Philip, in his final form of the story.

And so the whole excited town accepted Philip of fact and Philip of fable at one and the same time; and the boy found himself converted in spite of himself into a mere legend.

He did not like it. He did not like the way men lowered their voices when he came near. He did not like the manner in which they made way for him. He was troubled by the silences that went before his face and the whispers that stirred behind his back.

People did not smile at him; they merely stared. Only the children were gay and made free of him and his presence whenever he dared to put foot in the street. He no sooner appeared than a shouting procession formed before and behind and around him. They caught at his hands; they tugged at his coat; they shouted and cheered at him.

The town had found a hero, but a hero a little too terrible to take to their hearts. Everyone watched him in the expectation of some immense event.

He himself tried to stop the talk and the excitement. He called on the sheriff and took him to one side.

"I'm very sorry," said Philip, "that people seem to be talking about me."

"Sure you are," said the ironical sheriff.

"I want to tell you—and you can tell others—that the fight with the Colonel was *not* easy—"

He opened his shirt and showed his throat, bruised brown and black where that terrible grip had fallen.

"I'm bruised all over," confessed Philip. "Every breath is still painful! Just tell them that I'm like everybody else. I'm not a giant!"

"Thanks," said the sheriff, "but I'll let them use their eyes for themselves!" And he nodded wisely.

Philip went back to the hotel more nervous than ever, and more irritated as the children swooped down upon him in a drove. But on the way the great news came to him, with Doc Rivers bearing it, and a crowd around him to witness the truth of the tale, which, simply, was that Doc Rivers had been in Grogan's saloon relating the adventures of Philip to an admiring crowd, when the two Chisholms boldly walked into the place and stood one on each side of Doc. It was Bert who spoke, his back to the bar and his hands on his hips, so that he could keep everyone under due surveillance while he talked.

He bore a message from the Colonel to the effect that the latter had learned of certain false stories now being circulated in the town to the effect that he had been fairly beaten by Philip. He branded all such tales as open lies. To prove his point, a week from that date he would ride in person into the town and there encounter Philip before the eyes of men, who ever cared to stay and watch. He would come between the noon hour and one o'clock, so that his arrival would not keep anyone from his work.

Having delivered this message, the Chisholms lingered for one drink—Bert drinking while Archie watched the crowd, and Archie drinking while Bert kept guard. Then they backed along the bar to the

rear door, leaped through it, and were gone at once, unpursued. In fact, there was no specific charge against them, except the general charges against all the Purchass clan and their agents.

No one cared to play the hand of justice in this case, and the pair went off scot-free. So Philip received his message and went on to the hotel with Rivers to discuss the meaning of it. Rivers loudly declared that it was sheer bluff. If the Colonel intended to right himself and recover his lost ground, he surely would have come straight in, without sending a message before his arrival.

There was something else to talk of when they reached the hotel. For the first mule-loads of ore had been carried into town and assayed. They turned out less rich than had been expected. Also, the vein was discovered to be pinching out rapidly; but even so a large fortune was assured from it. Old Delmar had come in with the mules; and that night there was high festivity through all the hotel. There was only one spot of gloom, and that was the face of Philip himself.

CHAPTER XLII

WE live according to a definite scale of values. The old scale for Philip had been composed there on the heights of Pillar Mountain, looking down on a world represented, so far as men were concerned, by the starry twinkling of distant lights. He had come down out of a dream which possessed him so thoroughly that he refused to see the facts until Maizie had wakened him. And, since that awakening, no other set of values was given to him:

He hung now in a sort of limbo, unsure of himself, unsure of everything around him. He was haunted by a constant yearning for the girl, and he was cursed with a constant denial of her. She had seemed to him at first a bright and beautiful angel, somewhat given to slang. She seemed to him now a beautiful spirit of evil, treacherous and dangerous and filled with wiles.

The day after the arrival of the news of the Colonel's threat, Jolly Delmar tried to open a difficult subject.

"Look here, Phil," said he, "I want to talk to you a minute about Maizie. It seems that you and her have sort of fallen out, and from what I can gather—"

"Why should you and I talk about it?" interrupted Philip. "Maizie and I are both happy?"

"Are *you* happy?" asked Jolly.

"Of course," lied Philip.

"Then let it go," said Jolly, and closed his eyes, with a frown of trouble.

In the meantime, Maizie avoided him sedulously. Twice, passing him in the hall, she had lowered her head and gone by swiftly, silently. There was a sort of slinking guilt in her manner, he told himself. So he made himself hold his head high, and smiled upon her with a bland indifference.

But time hung heavily on the hands of Philip. He would above all things have preferred to leave the town simply because Maizie was in it. He wanted to flee to a great distance, in the hope that perhaps intervening leagues would make her memory less sweet. He wanted to commit himself to some new course of action, but he could not think to what he could turn himself. In the meantime, a mortal hardness was growing in his heart. The awe, the reverence, the fear which attended all his goings and comings meant little or nothing. He shrugged his shoulders at even the danger of the Colonel's coming.

Sometimes, in the mornings, he would walk out to the edge of the town and use his guns on any convenient targets. Otherwise he gave no heed to the famous Colonel. For, after all, he had met and beaten the Colonel once with his bare hands, and he had no fear as to what would happen when their hands were filled with weapons. In some manner, he felt that the first encounter had established not so much a physical as a spiritual superiority over the Colonel, and he was

perfectly willing to wait for the appointed day. Indeed, it was the one touch of actual interest in his life at that moment.

He was sitting alone in his room in the hotel, with the Colonel's coming a day and a half away, when he heard Loafer begin to howl and bark in the street, and the sound passed on into the hotel and up the stairs until it stopped with a mighty clamoring at his door.

He opened it, and Loafer leaped in on him.

"This gent says he's a friend of yours," said the proprietor.

He stepped back, and Philip saw before him the gray head and the bright eyes of Oliver Aytoun.

It was a mighty shock to him. In the turmoil of these last few days, he almost had forgotten the man of the mountain. Now he drew Uncle Oliver into the chamber and placed him in the chair by the window, and brought a lamp and placed it on the little table near by him, so that he could see Aytoun's face.

"Have you had supper?" he asked.

"No," said Oliver Aytoun.

"Come with me and I'll get you something to eat."

"I've walked down here to talk to you, Philip," said Aytoun. "I'm not thinking of food."

"Has something happened to you?"

"No, not to me; to you!"

"I don't know what you mean!" said Philip.

"You've grown up, in these few days since you left me."

"Has it been only a few days?"

"A handful."

Philip was silent, thinking back.

"It hasn't been long—in time," he admitted.

Loafer was going joyously from one of them to the other, as though he wished to draw them still closer together, and Aytoun smiled on the dog.

"Philip," he said suddenly. "You're not happy."

"I?"

"Tell me."

"No, I'm not happy."

"And it's because of the Colonel?"

"How do you know about him?" asked Philip curiously.

"All the mountains are ringing with the news that you are to fight the Colonel here the day after tomorrow."

"Even Pillar Mountain?"

"I went down to take some wolf pelts and skins. They told me at the trading store. I decided that I'd better come here."

"It's nothing," answered Philip. "I've already met him once."

"Never with guns, I believe?"

"Never, but it will be the same thing."

"You're not afraid?"

"No."

"Nevertheless," said Aytoun, "you must not meet him."

Philip waited. "Will you tell me why?" he asked, when there was no immediate continuation of the talk.

Oliver Aytoun paused to fill his pipe, packing it

carefully and solidly, just as Philip always remembered him doing. And that small act, for some unknown reason, brought tears into Philip's eyes.

He waited while the pipe was lighted and the smoke was drifting upwards in a thin mist.

"I've been trying to think of ways about," said Oliver Aytoun. "I would go to the Colonel, but I don't know where to find him. And I've had to come to you."

"Yes," said Philip.

"I've come to ask you not to meet the Colonel, Philip."

Philip was silent, astonished. He did not need to ask for a reason, but almost immediately Aytoun added: "Because he's a friend of mine. Is that enough?"

Philip tried to speak. He hardly had thought that there was a thing in the world which could excite him; but now he had found reason enough. It fairly stopped his heart.

"Uncle Oliver!" he cried out.

"Yes, my boy."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Will you tell me, Philip?"

"It would mean sneaking away. After I've told everyone that I'm not afraid of the Colonel. And I want to tell you about him—"

He paused.

"Go on."

"No, because I haven't many good things to say—and he's your friend."

"Do you think he's a bad man?"

"Do I think? He—he's a man, Uncle Oliver, who hires himself out to the highest bidder."

"He's not a coward, Philip?"

"No, he's not that."

"Does he keep his word?"

"Apparently he does."

"Is he cruel?"

"No, he wouldn't let them torture Jolly Delmar. I suppose that you know about that?"

"I know about nothing, except that you're not to meet the Colonel."

Philip was silent.

"Will you promise me, boy?"

"No," said Philip, "I'm sorry that I can't promise."

Oliver Aytoun got up from his chair; his face was ghastly behind the thin veil of smoke. Still he kept his voice wonderfully quiet.

"I think I have a right to ask a good deal from you, Philip."

"God knows you have!" cried Philip suddenly. "Ten lives, if I had that many. You have a right to ask anything except my honor, Uncle Oliver!"

"So—so—so!" murmured Aytoun in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper. "I should have guessed that it would be on that plane."

He added aloud: "Then I shall have to pay an enormous price, Philip, to keep you from this meeting."

"You pay a price, Uncle Oliver?"

"I shall have to pay the price. Hush! Did I hear something under the window?"

He leaned out and looked down.

"There's a veranda there, Philip," he said.

"It opens on to the room of a girl who never would listen to voices in my room," answered Philip. "She wouldn't care what was said up here. But you said that you would have to pay the price?"

"The price of your affection and your faith," said the old man. "I am going to show you that I have been a scoundrel, Philip. I go back to the old story of how the rider brought you to my house. You remember, of course?"

"I remember, of course."

"I told you that he never came back. That was not true. Five years later he returned. He wanted you. At that moment you were playing high up the hillside with a tame rabbit. I told him that you were no longer with me. I told him that you were dead. It seemed a hard blow to him. I watched his face, and if he heard your voice coming back towards the shack, I told myself that I would kill him, Philip, and never let you know what had happened. I wanted you for myself! Have you ever heard of a worse thing done by any man?"

Philip was silent.

"And always I was afraid to come down into the world, because you might be taken away from me. But at last I've had to let you go, and now I have to tell you everything. Because God himself would call out from Heaven if you met the Colonel, Philip. He's your father."

CHAPTER XLIII

PICTURES began to flash across the mind of Philip, almost blinding him. He saw the street of the town thronged with watchers in the white, hot hour of noon; he even saw the heat waves rising from the roofs, and the whirlpools of dust racing here and there like little tornadoes; and a huge man on a huge horse, with a cape flung back over his shoulders coming slowly down, a rifle balanced across the pommel of his saddle.

He saw that same form dashing through the woods of the mountainside and reaching the shack with a child in his arms. He saw the same monstrous form stretched in the invalid's chair, facing the sun. He saw him stagger back into the shadow of a tree, stunned and beaten.

At last he said: "I should have guessed. I could not have got such strength in my hands from any other man."

He had no answer to this, and looking around him he saw that he was alone. Loafer was lying across his feet. Even the wisps of the pipe smoke had been drawn away out the window, though the fragrance of the tobacco was still in the room. At that, he ran hastily down the stairs and inquired on the veranda, but the oddly dressed old stranger had not gone out that way.

Philip turned back in despair. Aytoun, of course, had taken the long silence of the boy as a heartless condemnation. So he had slipped away, and now he was working quietly back toward the lonely shack on Pillar Mountain. Well, what did the world and its opinion matter, compared with one moment of pain in such a soul as that of Oliver Aytoun?

He went straight back through the hotel to the stable, saddled the mustang which had been given for his use by old Delmar, and swung on to the back of the horse. He would have liked to say farewell to Rivers and Delmar, but their faces would have been hard to confront. No, it was much better to go off quietly, like this. Let them think their own thoughts about him!

Only one thing was of importance. When Uncle Oliver reached his shack the next morning, he must find smoke curling from the chimney to welcome him home. After that—well, let time take care of itself!

He found a rear way from the hotel corral behind the stable, and then turned across the open fields. He had to cross two stretches of stubble, before he gained the trail among the pines, and as he turned on to it, he heard a horse whinny behind him, but he paid no attention to that noise.

It was very late. A cold wind made him aware that he had gone out without a coat or a slicker. The clouds blew across the stars. Rain fell in sheets, icy cold, and drenched him to the skin, but he was aware of his misery only now and again. Then the blanket

of his wretched thoughts closed over him again and the flesh was forgotten.

The moon went up, at last, unseen after the first streaks of ghostly light in the east, but yielding a faint glow even behind the clouds. He could see them, mountain-big, driven before the wind, sometimes with their edges turned to translucent pearl by the moon behind, but more often obscure outlines, guessed at rather than seen. The wind was out in high force. He heard it marching through the woods, or screaming far off, then leaping suddenly upon him and deafening him with its whistling; he heard the groaning of the boughs against one another; and twice, at least, the frightful crash as some giant was toppled and fell crushing and crushed.

But Philip rode on, keeping the horse grimly to the trail which now was more easily visible as the moon stood at the height, and made the runlets of rain water gleam like dull silver. For still the rain came down intermittently, now crashing on his face and stinging his body even through his shirt, and now a tender mist.

Through such a mist, at last, he saw the form of a rider in the trail before him, and as he came nearer, he called out. He had a faint hope that it might be Uncle Oliver, but Aytoun on one of his mules was not likely to have covered so much ground as this. No, he was back in the forest, struggling slowly along.

He called more loudly. The rain fell in a dark torrent. It cleared again, and the wild wind in the heavens tore the clouds apart.

His horse stopped of its own volition and touched the nose of the other which was in its way, while Philip found himself looking down on the wet face of Maizie Delmar.

"You!" cried Philip huskily. "What are you doing here? What made you follow me?"

"I found your slicker," said Maizie. "I had an idea maybe you'd want it, a night like this."

She held it out to him; he let it fall into the mud. And then the wind hurled the clouds together in such dense masses that little enough light came down to the gloomy world and that little was further dimmed by a blinding downpour of the rain. When the thunder of it eased a little, Philip could hear the hissing of the runlets, as they shot down the face of the trail, scouring the ground away.

He brought his horse a little nearer, and reaching out, his hand found the cold, wet surface of a rubber slicker.

"What made you follow me?" he repeated.

"I dunno," said Maizie. "I sort of needed the air, I guess."

"Maizie, Maizie, are you going to make a joke of me still? Am I always a fool, in your eyes?"

"A fool?" said Maizie. "I'd never let a fool break my heart!" And she added, with a sudden tremor of her voice: "And you've busted mine to bits, Phil."

He drew still closer. The steam of her sweating horse came up to him. He drew still closer. The fragrance of the girl was in his face.

"You were on that veranda!" he said.

"I was," said Maizie. Then she added: "I ain't a fine, clean-minded, honorable person like you, Phil. I'm just a hard-headed girl that don't miss a trick if she can help it. I listened under your window. I heard every word that was said, I think. Poor old man!"

"Ah, yes," said Philip. "Poor Uncle Oliver."

"And you?" said Maizie.

"I?"

"You wouldn't waste any pity on yourself, I guess."

"I'm a grown man, and a young man," said Philip.

"It doesn't matter about me."

"*I'll* cry for you, then," said Maizie. "I can't help crying. You baby!"

"Maizie," he said, finding her arm and pressing it.

"I wish that you'd stop crying."

"I would if I could," said Maizie. "I don't want to."

"It makes me dizzy and a little ill," said Philip.

"I—I never knew that you cried—except when there was something to gain by it."

"And there's nothing to gain now, I guess?" said Maizie through her sobs.

"Ah, no," answered he. "I'm a disgraced and ruined man. I'll never dare to look the world in the face again. I've brought shame to my few friends. But what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Maizie. "What will *you* do?"

"I'm going on to Pillar Mountain."

"I'm going on to Pillar Mountain too," said Maizie.

"There's only a shack there. It's quicker and easier for you to turn back."

"Phil!" cried the girl, in a suddenly changed and terrible voice.

"Yes, Maizie," he answered, shocked and abashed.

"Phil, come closer to me!"

He drew still closer. Her hands caught his and shook them savagely.

"Phil, d'you hear me?"

"Yes, yes! Are you ill, Maizie?"

"Ill? I'm dyin'! Phil, don't you see that I'm wild in love with you? Won't you tell me if you care the least mite? If you don't love me, I'll come along anyway and cook for you and the poor old man, if you'll let me."

There are thunderbolts of joy as well as of sorrow. Philip sat transfixed.

"Are you gunna tell me that I'm only play-actin' now?" cried Maizie. "Will you speak one word to me, Phil? Will you just say yes or no?"

"Hush!" said Philip.

He took her within one great arm, gently, and the kind moon broke through enough to let him see her face.

"O God in Heaven!" said Philip. "O glorious God!"

There was no rain, there was no wind for them, there was no darkness. The golden beauty of autumn and the green, sweet face of spring crowded about them all that night, and a sun of joy smoothed the path before them. They laughed, while the thunder beat,

and they waited for the lightning flashes, to see each other with eyes filled with love.

So the sun rose and found them. The wind, changing, brushed the sky clear above them, and they were winding slowly up the side of Pillar Mountain.

"Will you tell me a thing?" said Philip.

"There's nothing left to tell," said Maizie.

"Ah, but there is."

"Well, then?"

"I want to know when you really first thought you cared a bit for me, Maizie."

"I'm ashamed, Phil."

"I want to know."

"Well, it was when you held me up and talked to me like I was a man and told me that you saw through me. I began to love you then. It went through me—sort of like a cramp, Phil."

He laughed, and still they laughed joyously together; at one another, at the world, at the tall, proud trees, at the glorious sun which God had hung for them in the sky, at the flashing creek—

"Look!" cried Philip. "He's beaten us after all!"

For they had come in view of the shack, and smoke curled slowly from its chimney and blew away, snatched by the wind.

THE END

PLEASANT JIM

CHAPTER I

ALL that Jim Pleasant had been, all that he had done, amounted to nothing. His life, for our purposes, begins with the moment when he ran down Charlie Rizdal in the mountains behind King's River. It would have been a pity for either of those expert fighters to have a real advantage over the other, but the God of Battle provided that they should meet fairly and squarely on the elbow turn of a narrow trail with a two-thousand-foot outer edge. If there were any disadvantage, it hung upon Jim Pleasant, for at that moment he was busily studying the sky, not regarding the imaginary rings of the poet's paradise but more profoundly interested in the polycyclic flight of a buzzard which was throwing its broad loops between the peaks that looked into the valley. The conclusion of Jim Pleasant—or Pleasant Jim, as he was ironically and punningly nicknamed most of the time—was that it would be a vast advantage for a fellow on a man-trail to be able to live like a buzzard on the wing. For his own part, he had not tasted of any food for two days and the ache of his stomach made him frown a little; moreover, a terrible sit-fast was forming on his pony's back, and so Pleasant Jim rode under the burden of many clouds, at the very moment when he turned the corner of the trail and ran into that delightful gun-fighter, Charlie Rizdal.

Accordingly, Jim was slow. He was no quicker, say, than a scared wolf or a startled cat; as a matter of fact, his bullet flew wide and only pierced the shoulder of Rizdal, but since

it arrived at its mark just a hundredth part of a second before Rizdal pulled his trigger, the latter incontinently fired into the ground. At the same time the impact thrust him half around in the saddle.

He was a man of parts, however, as a man must be who has a reward of eight thousand dollars hanging over his head, and even when he was thrown off balance and thoroughly staggered by the impact of that forty-five caliber slug, he had the presence of mind to observe that his horse was much bulkier than Jim Pleasant's and that it was, moreover, on the inside of the trail. Accordingly, as he fell back, he clutched the flanks of his good horse with the spurs, and the frantic gelding leaped straight ahead into Pleasant's mustang.

The latter shot into open space like a pebble snapped from the fingers; but Pleasant had seen the meaning of that charge just in time, and while the poor little mustang spun head over heels towards the canyon floor two thousand feet below, his master was clinging to the body of Rizdal.

One of Mr. Rizdal's arms was useless now, of course, but with his other hand he picked from the top of his riding boot a long knife which he wore there much as a Highlander wears his skean dhu. Pleasant, in the meantime, was clinging to Rizdal, while the frightened horse plunged madly along the winding curves of the trail and at every corner the body of Pleasant sailed out like the boy who is snapper in the game of "crack the whip."

He saw the glitter of Rizdal's knife, but he was not startled into the commission of an act of folly. Rizdal deserved death, beyond doubt, but dead he was worth only five thousand, while, living, he was worth eight; for some people thought that if the bank robber were captured alive he might be induced to surrender some of his old spoils for the sake

of a lighter sentence. Pleasant thought in time, and instead of pulling the trigger a second time, he used the long barrel of the Colt to tap the robber on the head.

Rizdal fell from his horse and so did Pleasant, but the latter fell on top. When Rizdal's wits returned to him, he found his captor sitting cross-legged beside him on the trail, weighing in his hand a scarcely ponderable bit of stone.

"Well?" said Rizdal, sitting up, and clasping his wounded shoulder. "You came out best, as usual."

Pleasant decided to overlook the compliment.

"I've been wondering if it's worth while, Charlie," said he. "It's a long trip; and there'll have to be a wait, first, while your shoulder is healing; and after you arrive at Fisher Falls, of course they'll simply hang you. Whachu think?"

"That's one thing that might happen," agreed Rizdal calmly. "What's the other?"

"The other is neater, a lot," declared the victor. "Here's two of us to ride one horse. Well, if you was to step over the edge, here, we wouldn't have to ride double, you wouldn't have to hang, and I wouldn't have all the bother of watching over you and nursing you in camp while your damn shoulder gets sound, and while you figure ways to cut my throat at night."

"I always heard you was a reasonable man, Pleasant," answered Rizdal, "and now I see it for myself. Besides, if you fuss around a couple of weeks with me in the mountains, here, the greasers that are working your place for you may run off most of your good stock."

"They won't do that," answered Pleasant Jim, without hesitation. "Three years back, when I was just starting, a couple of the boys decided to crook the game on me while I

was away on a trip. I had to chase them almost to the Rio, but since then I ain't had any trouble."

"You brought back the stolen horses, eh?"

"All except one. One of those greasers had been a prize-fighter and he had a cauliflower ear. Well, I brought back that ear, too, and nailed it into a post on my range. It's a funny thing how I been able to trust my punchers from that time on."

Mr. Rizdal nodded, caressing his bleeding shoulder.

"Well, Pleasant," said he, "you could put a bullet through me and say it was done during the fight. But speakin' personal, I don't aim to step off that edge of the trail."

Mr. Pleasant looked up to the mountain heads, from the southern sides of which the tractile clouds were being drawn out upon the wind.

"As I was sayin' before," he remarked absently, "there's three grand more in you alive than dead. I think I'll take you in, Charlie. Now, lemme have a look at that shoulder, will you?"

They patched up the shoulder between them, working industriously, chatting of odds and ends. From Rizdal's pack they got iodine and poured it into the wound, while the wounded man's face went white; yet he did not falter in his sentence.

When the wound was dressed, they moved half a mile down the trail to a little glacial meadow, and there they camped for the next three weeks while the wound closed and healed with magic speed. It was easy to get food. With little snares they caught birds and squirrels for the pot, and once the rifle of Pleasant dropped a deer on the farther side of the little lake. It was grueling and nervous work, for not a minute of the day did the captor dare to turn his back

upon the robber; and at night he put aside his weapons in the fork of a tree and tied himself to the body of Rizdal. If he kept so much as a knife on him, that knife might get into the clever fingers of the captive, and Pleasant would be minus eight thousand dollars, and life as well; but when they had nothing but bare hands to use, Pleasant had no doubt of how a contest would terminate. Apparently, Rizdal had no doubt either; he decided to try another method.

On an evening, a lobo at the edge of the trees raised a long, ululant cry, and the two sat up and listened to the ghostly wailing.

"This is the right sort of a place for that devil," remarked Pleasant.

"Well, the place don't matter so much," decided Rizdal. "Put him in a kennel and teach him to wag his tail, he'd still be a wolf. You're like that, old timer. They've kenneled you up, they think, but you're still a wolf, and one morning they'll wake up and find that you've slaughtered a flock of the greyhounds and the lapdogs and the poodles. You're like the wolf, all the time; it's work for your teeth that you want."

"Because I go a-man hunting," remarked the other. "No, it's just that I want extra cash to clear my farm ranch. This here job will about shove me into the open, Charlie."

"If you want the cash," said Rizdal, "I could show you a quicker way."

"I'm listening."

"Look how you're fixed. You turn me in and get the blood money and I hang. All right. Then you have my brother on your neck, and Long Tom ain't a joke to play the cards against."

"We gotta take chances," philosophized Pleasant.

"Sure. I ain't trying to scare you. Just reasoning. But you admit that Long Tom is quite a man?"

"He is," replied Pleasant, with quiet decision.

"Now, what a cinch it would be, Jim, to just meet up with Tom and let him drop a chunk of banknotes into your pocket. Eight thousand you get from some damned Pooh-Bah who'll make a speech to you and then forget you. Say you take fifteen thousand from Tom—who *won't* forget. That's logic, I say; what do you think?"

"Sure it's logic," nodded the other. "The slickest I ever heard. But I don't like floating funds, old boy. I put my money in the bank, and I play dog till somebody makes me play wolf."

A skein of birds slipped in a long line above the trees, and the robber paused to watch them disappear down the wind.

"All right," he said. "Only, if ever you're trimmed, remember what you missed. Also, I don't hold no malice, particular. But Long Tom is different. Well, you think it over."

But if Pleasant thought the matter over, he said no word concerning it, and five weeks later, when the pink was just beginning to mix with the gray of the dawnlight, he rode with his prisoner into Fisher Falls and tapped at the door of the jail.

The jailer opened the heavy, creaking door with an oath and a yawn.

"What damn foolishness is up now?" he asked.

But presently his mind cleared.

"Come right in, Jim," said he. "This here bank is always open, and we'll honor your check."

CHAPTER II

A DRIVING tramontana came down from the white-headed upper range that morning, and Pleasant was glad to step out of the wind and inside the snug doors of the bank. The clerks looked up and smiled at him—they knew why he was there—and Lewis Fisher, the president, came in with the broadest of smiles, also.

"Three years ago, Jim," said he, in his private office, "there was fifteen thousand against you. Now there's barely twenty-five hundred. That's progress, my boy. Only twenty-five hundred between you and freedom!"

Mr. Fisher was not yet sixty, but he was the father of the town, had given it being and name, and he looked upon the place and all the people in it partly with a child's delight in a toy and partly with a sense of unreality, as though they were rather his dream than a fact. He was a public-spirited man. He had built Fisher's Theater; he had established Fisher's *Evening Democrat*; and he had allowed the town fathers to buy a central tract which was to be turned into a park, one day, though so far nothing had been done to ornament the sandy waste beyond the erection of a lofty stone statue which showed Lewis Fisher mounted upon a fiery steed of rather odd proportions. This was the man who smiled on young Jim Pleasant, who answered: "I'm free enough, Mr. Fisher."

"Never so long as you owe money," said the banker. "That's the penalty of speculation. Money makes strength; also, it makes slavery. Credit is the blood in the veins of the

commercial giant; it forms the shackles, also. So clear yourself of debt, my boy. I have an interest in your progress. I want to see you get on. That's why I give you this advice."

He patted and smoothed the top of his desk as he spoke. He could not touch that radiant, red-shot mahogany without feeling his strength renewed and his faith in himself reinforced. As he spoke, he did not look young Pleasant in the eye but regarded his own hand traveling softly across the polished wood, and the reflection traveling beside it, lit with a green spark from his emerald ring. Pleasant had nothing to say. He merely folded and tucked into his wallet the release which sliced away so large a part of his mortgage and then stood up.

"I'll be going along," said he.

"So soon? So soon?" asked the amiable Mr. Fisher. "Not even wait for a little celebration? Not sit in the sun for even a moment—not even wait for an *Evening Democrat* reporter to get the true story of the capture?"

Pleasant tossed his head, and quivered like an unbacked colt at sight of a halter. "Newspapers make nothin' but trouble," said he; "and I got to get back to the place."

The president of the bank stood up and shook hands.

"It's a fine thing to have done what you've done," said he, "for a few men like you make an entire community rest at ease!"

He glanced over his shoulder at the face of the great blue-black safe which filled in the corner of his office. Men said that a great fortune was locked behind its doors continually, in cash and in securities.

"Only," continued Lewis Fisher, a benevolent smile on his rosy, fatherly face, "don't forget that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!"

A group of admiring townsfolk had gathered around Pleasant Jim's horse—the one, of course, which he had taken from Rizdal on the trail—but he stepped through the midst of their questions and congratulations and swung into the saddle. An active young man caught the bridle and held the tall horse.

"I'm from the *Evening Democrat*," said he, "and I got a couple of questions to ask you, Mr. Pleasant. First, what—"

Never did the Pope of Geneva look more grimly upon a critic than Mr. Pleasant looked upon the reporter.

"Just slack off on that bridle, friend," said he. "I'm busy."

And, deftly, he twitched the horse through the group and sent him pelting down the street. By the time the last house of the village jerked away behind him, he had forgotten Fisher Falls and the considerable glory of his last adventure; that was put resolutely to the rear of his mind. There remained in front of him only twenty-five hundred dollars in debt; that paid, his ranch and all that was upon it would be his. In a word, he stood only around the corner from assured success!

Eight miles separated him from his farm, and he made the good gelding turn off that distance at a dizzy speed until he topped the last hill on the verge of his domain. There he drew rein and went on softly, his eyes busy. It was no great tract but all of it was good. Let others have their sweeping acres of desert, pricked with a scattering of bunch grass here and there, burned crisp by summer heat and whipped and beaten by the white winter storms; he preferred this sheltered little valley—it was small, to be sure, but all his from the roots of the stream that ran through it to the widening mouth of the hollow. The self-satisfied skipjacks of the town might

sit in their offices and draw down a weekly pay envelope, but he preferred the longer work and the greater gamble with its larger reward. No water famine could destroy his stock and where could better pasturage be found than the short, thick grass which grew here? He did not waste his energies on the maintenance of a clumsy herd of cows, neither did he run a ragged band of mustangs, or keep goats or sheep or swine; instead, his fortune was invested in a glorious bit of saddle stock, tough and hardy with the broncho strain but made taller and swifter by constant crossing upon hot blood. A "flush" cowpuncher knew where to come when he wanted between his knees something that could throw dust in the eyes of nearly every other horse on the range. He journeyed to the valley of Pleasant Jim and picked a mount there. The prices were high, but the quality was unquestionable and a guaranty went with every sale. There were a few instances when the most delightful picture horses had turned out "high-headed fools," or proved lacking in bottom; Pleasant took back these failures and gave sound stock in exchange, and though this policy cost him somewhat at the moment, it enabled him to push up his prices still farther, for when this solid policy transpired and was talked about, horse-lovers came from still greater distances with wallets stuffed more thickly.

So Pleasant Jim reviewed his past and his present as he jogged his horse up the valley. It might be christened "Pleasant Valley" one of these days. A prickling sense of joy ran up his spine at the thought, for it was, in fact, Pleasant Valley to him.

When he came through the southern gate, a gray two-year-old came dancing to inspect him, then in alarm shot away like a bolt, glancing over the good green turf and disappear-

ing into the shadows of a coppice. There would be a mount for some one—bone and substance enough to please one of those Montana fellows who want a mountain of horseflesh under them! He jogged on beside the creek, taking keen note that the fences were in good repair and all as it should be. Plainly the Mexicans had not been idle in his absence! So he passed the little river pasture where half a dozen brood mares, their foals beside them, lifted their heads and looked at him with recognition in their gentle eyes. A lump formed in the throat of Pleasant Jim, and he breathed rapidly. He had lived with enough bitter hardness to appreciate what is good in life; and looking about him, he was content. Some day he might be able to push his holdings farther up the hills on either side; he could get that land cheap, because he owned the available water beneath it. Some day he might step farther down into the broadness of Fisher's Valley, too; but in the meantime, this was very good, and he told himself that he was content.

The house itself was tucked between two big trees on a hill near the creek; one room for the kitchen stove and the greasers, one room for himself. In a way, that little place was a fort; the log walls were safe protection, and the four small windows looked out like eyes to every quarter of the valley. So, like a landholder returning to his land, like a herdsman to his herd, like a general to his fort, Pleasant Jim came home.

There was only one stain of unhappiness. Twenty-five hundred dollars remained unpaid, and Banker Fisher had declared that a man in debt is in part a slave.

He quickened his horse, now, for he could see at the hitching rack before his cabin a fine, tall bay, with silverwork on his saddle glinting in the sun. He who owned such a horse

as that would be most likely to have an open heart and an open purse to buy another of like quality.

Clattering noises came from the kitchen, and looking through the door, Pleasant saw that the stranger was helping himself to a cup of coffee and frying a few slices of bacon, now smoking in a pan.

"Howdy," said Pleasant, throwing his reins.

"Howdy," said the other, without turning around, for at that moment the coffee came to a boil and had to be snaked from the fire with care. He was a big fellow, wide and heavy in the shoulders, gaunt about the waist—the very type of Pleasant himself. Then he turned, and the host instinctively went for his gun, for he found himself looking into the brown face and the keen gray eyes of that undergod of smugglers, robbers, and gun-fighters, the brother of Charlie Rizdal—Long Tom in the flesh!

CHAPTER III

LONG TOM showed no alarm whatever, as though realizing that the sanctity of a guest armed him against all danger. He put the coffee pot on the back of the stove and extended his hand.

"Before we shake," suggested Pleasant, "tell me if you know about Charlie?"

"Sure do I know about him," nodded the other.

And at that, since his smile of good will persisted, their hands closed together.

"Had your breakfast, Jim?"

"No."

"Sit down to this. I'll drop some more bacon in the pan."

"Sit down and rest yourself, Tom. This is my business."

He went to the stove, and a little shudder went through him as he turned his back on the long-rider. With such a man, one never could tell. Perhaps all would be well; perhaps not—and if not, a well placed forty-five caliber bullet would end the dreams of Pleasant Jim!

However, Long Tom was talking of cheerful odds and ends—how well the valley looked; how the water from the limestone mountains put bone on the yearlings; and there was a brown mare whose cut appealed to Long Tom; perhaps she was for sale?

They were opposite one another at the table, at last, taking stock, letting their imaginations have some scope. To Long Tom it seemed that never before had he seen a man so fit; and there was something about the wrists and the fingers of

the rancher that promised speed and power in equal proportion. To Pleasant Jim came the feeling that his match sat before him. Whether hand to hand or gun to gun, for deftness or for strength, Long Tom was a formidable man, and would have been judged so even without the past which was attributed to him. His jaws were somewhat underhung and his expression, perhaps on account of that peculiar feature, was a trifle grim in ordinary moments of repose, though at other times his gay manner and a suggestion of libertinage in his air counteracted the impression. In the meantime, Pleasant determined to give away nothing and to watch every motion of his dangerous guest. At the same time, it was not altogether unpleasant to be near this famous brigand who stood out among other men as a gigantic menhir rises over a ruined city.

"I haven't come about Charlie," said Long Tom, dropping suddenly to business, "but I've come to see the man who was good enough to take him. Ten hands, they generally have to have; you needed only two. Well, Pleasant, I'm going to use you!"

Pleasant Jim smiled a little.

"All right," said he.

"I want," said the other, "anywhere from five days to a week of your time. You'll need two fast horses—your place is full of them—and you'll have to have your wits about you. What money do you want for a job like that?"

"Go on," said Pleasant Jim.

"You have a price on your time. If somebody wanted an extra puncher in your off season, what would you work for?"

"I'd never leave my place for less than fifty a week."

"I want you to ride two days from here and light a fire

on a mountain. Up at the top. There are people who don't want that fire to be lighted. They might try to give you a bad time coming away. Dangerous, but not too dangerous for you, I'd take it. Well, what would you say to that?"

"A little off the line of punching."

"Yes. A little. What would you name as a price for that?"

"About five hundred dollars," said the rancher, striking out at a bold figure.

"I'll make it a thousand," replied Long Tom instantly.

"Mind you, if there's anything crooked about it, I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Why should you care, Pleasant, if you're well paid?"

"Nobody can pay me high enough for a thug's job. I've got my work cut out for me here and what if I have to lose this for the sake of a thousand or two that looks easy but ain't?"

"You're tied to this racket?"

"Yes."

"It's a snug little valley," replied the bandit. "I'd choke without a bigger horizon than this, but every man to his own likings—and now I'll tell you: All you'd have to do would be to take this matchbox, you see? Filled with these same matches—which you're not to use on your cigarettes because, as you may notice"—here he opened the little metal box—"the heads of these here ain't apt to light very well! You take this along, and when you get to the place you're bound for, you light a fire and hang around for a while. Maybe you'll see a fire blaze up to answer you on one of the nearest peaks. If you do, just put your fire out, and a few inches under the ashes, you bury this here matchbox. After that you can come home."

"If there was no answering fire?"

"Then you go back to the top of the mountain three nights running and you light the fire every night. If there's no answer after that, you come back here to me, and you bring the box and the matches with you. I'd do this job myself," went on Long Tom, "but I got to get Charlie out."

"You'll manage that?" grinned Pleasant Jim.

"It's nothing at all—except a little time and money," replied the outlaw. "But look at your own part. All you know is, if you're caught, that somebody gave you this box of matches and told you what to do with it. Nobody can hang you for that, I suppose?"

"I suppose not."

"Then what do you say?"

One thousand from twenty-five hundred would leave fifteen hundred. There was nothing niggling or obscure about the thinking of Pleasant. He took out a bone-handled bowie knife and began to carve the edge of the table, already much nicked from similar absent-minded whittlings.

"Them that ask too many questions could be damned, I suppose," said Pleasant Jim.

"Naturally."

One thousand from twenty-five hundred would leave fifteen hundred—another stroke or two, or a few good sales of horses, and he could pay off Lewis Fisher and thereafter look the world in the face.

He rammed the knife back into its holster.

"Sometimes," said Pleasant Jim, "you fellows ring in somebody and try to work him all the time afterwards. Now I'll tell you. I fall for this job; but it's the last one. I see no harm in it. I don't stick up anybody. I don't touch a

match to anybody's barn or reputation. But tell me who the gents will be that might try to snag me?"

"Four chances out of five, you won't be bothered. The fifth chance is that a lot of hard-boiled gents with a United States marshal at their head may try to lag you."

Pleasant Jim whistled softly.

"A marshal?" he echoed.

"Does that come too high? You see, I put the cards on the table."

Pleasant Jim looked slowly around him—but he failed to see the dingy room, the bunk with the tangle of soiled blankets in it, the heap of broken saddles, bridles, spurs, bits, old clothes, worn-out shoes, and a hundred other odds and ends in the corner; he did not notice the staggering, lop-sided little table, the stove which leaned wearily to one side, the window, with thin boards from cracker boxes taking the place of panes in several instances, or the footworn boards of the flooring. Instead, he saw a vision of a strong-walled house of stone, thick, soft rugs under foot, fireplaces yawning for the logs piled in the woodshed, and a breath of sweetness and cleanliness through the entire place. Some day all of this vision would come to pass, assuredly, and in that good time, he would have a wife, no doubt, and children to care for, and a high place in the community, and no man on the face of the earth could look up higher than to Pleasant Jim, in the height of his self-respect. Behind him lay the dark years of labor and struggle, of saving of money and spending of soul and body, of all that lay upon his consciousness, as remembered night terrors lie on the spirit of a child.

One thousand dollars for a week's work lifted him closer to the ideal! And if it were work done for a criminal, could he not close his eyes to that fact? Whatever the crime might

be, it was hidden from his eyes, and he could say that his only knowledge was of a box of matches to be buried in the hot ashes of a fire!

He turned back to Long Tom; and he saw that though the face of his companion was calm, yet there was a tenseness about the mouth and a grimness about the eyes, so that it was plain that the outlaw set much upon this decision. Well, perhaps Tom felt that this was the beginning of a long association, but as for the illusions of the bandit, let them take care of themselves; they had no part in the life of Pleasant Jim, and they were no portion of his care.

"I'll take the job," said he.

Long Tom paused to swallow a mouthful of hot coffee, and as it went down he looked at the other with eyes pleasantly misted by the strength of the drink.

"All right," he nodded.

He took out a wallet without hesitation and opened it. Pleasant Jim saw within a giddy prospect of banknotes crowded together as thickly as they could be pressed, a veritable book of wealth. The outlaw took forth a slender sheaf—a mere fraction of the whole! He counted out ten one-hundred-dollar bills and laid them upon the table under the edge of the plate.

"There you are," he said.

"No C.O.D. business with you, I see," murmured Pleasant Jim, highly gratified.

"If you want to play crooked," said the other, "of course you can. But I trust you, Pleasant. Got anything stronger than coffee, here?"

Jim, without a word, brought from behind the door a small jug of whiskey and poured a liberal dram into a tin cup.

"And you?" asked the other.

"I ain't sick; and otherwise I don't take it."

"You play safe," remarked Long Tom.

He tossed off his potion and stood up.

"But you've done your stepping?" he suggested.

"I've done my stepping," answered Pleasant. "You can't step and work at the same time, I take it."

Long Tom walked out. Only at the door he paused and turned again.

"You know Black Mountain?"

"I know it."

"You might as well start to-day. To-morrow night there may be somebody watching to see a fire, Pleasant. Good luck to you."

From the saddle he spoke again.

"If you have to shoot at all, I advise you to shoot straight. Second thoughts ain't worth a damn at a time like that. So long!"

Straight down the valley he galloped his horse with the freedom of one who spent horseflesh as readily as he spent money. The strength of oil-tempered steel was in him; for how readily he had made this gamble and trusted his thousand to one who might keep it and make no return! A touch of envy mingled with Pleasant's admiration and not for the first time he felt that there was little freedom in his lot. Yonder man lived, but he in his shanty was like a corpse in the lich gate.

CHAPTER IV

HE waited only to see the two Mexicans, get their report of the happenings on the farm during his absence, and call for two horses. They brought him what he asked for, a ten-year-old mare, a seasoned traveler and like the wind for a short burst, together with a white-stockinged gelding that went a bit lame in the morning but could gallop the rest of the day. His pack was quickly made, and then with the meridional sun at his back, he went north towards Black Mountain.

He camped that night at the foot of the range, a tired man, but well ahead of his schedule. He was glad of that, for it gave him time to sleep himself out that night, and all of the next day he had before him to let the horses rest and graze while he wandered slowly up the grades, pausing at every prominent place to scan the surrounding country with his glass before he went on.

So he slept that night, seeing the broad, bright face of the Nile star in the heavens as he closed his eyes. In the gray of the morning he was up again. He made a small fire with care, taking only the dryest of twigs so that there might be a flame with no smoke. On that fire he made coffee; hardtack and dried figs were his food; and when he had finished eating he took pains to destroy every vestige of the blackened site of the fire.

The horses had done well. They had grazed on good bunch grass, than which no fodder is more nutritious except grain itself; and they were keen for whatever work lay before them.

There was little labor for them that day. What he wanted was a pair of fresh animals for the possible danger of the night; therefore he went on foot, leading the horses slowly on from ridge to ridge as he approached Black Mountain. There was good reason for its name; it stood like a dusky shadow among the sunlit peaks, bare-headed, gloomy, and seeming alone in spite of much noble company. Pleasant stalked it like an enemy, keeping careful ward on every hand, but in spite of himself he could not mark a sign of man or horse. There were only a few old cattle trails, made during the August heats when enterprising cowmen pushed their stock up into the heights where they would find not much grass, to be sure, but coolness of night, shade by day, and plenty of the best of pure water.

Those old trails he searched with careful eyes but could not read any new sign upon them. For his own part, he avoided going along them, but picked his way instead over the roughest rock-faces where the shod hoofs of his pair would leave no marks, however slight.

Before evening, he had run a loop around the mountain and fairly assured himself that Long Tom's expectations of danger must be wrong. Then, when the dusk began, he wound slowly up towards the height.

He had measured every inch of the landscape. He knew, to the north and south and east and west, what made the best terrain for swift flight in case of an emergency; his guns were cleaned and loaded; and he was prepared even against the danger he did not expect.

He reached the top and found that he had climbed into the last of the afterglow. All the valleys below him were pooled with thick darkness, but the final glow covered the tall peaks that went up on all sides of him like spear-points

raised above a shadowy army. It was a grave sight, which might have suggested strange thoughts to a more philosophical mind; but Pleasant Jim took more notice of his immediate surroundings, picking out a stretch of good grass just below the summit where the horses could graze during the night, and then taking note of a circle of old stones upon the very crest. Perhaps it was the remains of an impromptu fort built here by Indians in ancient times. He was more sure of that when he found the half-buried shard of an olla within the circle.

The discovery pleased him; it gave him a weird sense of companionship upon the bleak height, and he set about cheerfully gathering the materials for a bonfire among the brush which grew on every hand—brush large enough, he noted grimly, to mask the cautious approach of twenty men if they cared to steal up the height.

When he had seen these things, and stacked up his pile to a considerable size, he waited a little longer. Night thickened gradually, stirred up from below, and the keen stars pressed lower in the heavens. It was complete dark, at last, and when that time had come, he lighted the fire and stood back among the brush to watch the conflagration.

He had put on much green foliage; the result was at first a heavy smudge rolling straight upward through the windless sky, but presently the heat grew greater, a yellow point appeared in the center of the brush pile, and finally a strong head of flame leaped up, died and rose again, and then with a roar raised a twenty-foot arm of crimson high above Black Mountain.

The big man watched this display with much satisfaction and smiled as the brush crackled. So furiously did it burn that little twigs and then skeleton fragments of the bushes

soared upward and fell down slowly after the sparks which had accompanied them died in the black air above.

If a signal were waited for, such a column of terror as this could not fail to be seen from any of the neighboring summits. But though Pleasant swept all sides of the mountains near by with a ceaseless vigilance, he discovered not so much as one glimmer of answering light. So he took a quantity of rocks and sand which he had prepared beforehand and flung them on the core of the fire. For he had done enough to show friends that he was there. Why should he make a greater disturbance, which might attract any curious eyes besides those for whom it was intended?

The fire smoked and fumed for some time. He had to stamp over some of the embers and beat out others, but in a very few seconds the light was gone, and the density of darkness seemed now doubly great. Even the stars had nearly disappeared, and only by degrees they began to shine once more for his dazzled eyes.

After that, by turns he watched the mountains and harked and peered down the slopes of the Black Peak; but there was not the slightest token either of signal from beyond the valleys or of any approach towards him.

He was by no means without suspicions, and peering down into the hollows, he felt that danger lay covert there, as a trout lies in the shadows of the pool, waiting for a fly to fleck the surface of the water.

However, there was nothing further for him to do. And since it was foolish to waste sleeping hours, he prepared for bed, making down his blankets on the edge of the small pasture where he had left the horses. He did that for two reasons. One was that there was danger, otherwise, that wild animals might stampede his mounts; the second was that in

case some human tried to stalk him the beasts were apt to alarm him in time to allow him to defend himself and them. It had turned bitterly cold, with a rising wind cutting across from the loftier snow summits, so he took a noggin of brandy to warm his blood, then rolled in his blankets and was instantly asleep.

The first sign of light wakened him, as usual, for he was trained in the observance of day and night like any bird of prey. He washed his face and methodically shaved in a little spring head which had been bubbling gently beside him all the night. After that, he scrubbed a pair of extra woolen socks with a bit of yellow laundry soap, washed out a bandanna and a suit of underwear, and so prepared himself for the day with what would have seemed to most frontiersmen a most finicky waste of time and labor.

After this, he made his breakfast fire with all due care and finished off a brief meal, covering the traces of the little fire with all of the precautions which he had used before. That done, it occurred to him that the two horses might not be concealed sufficiently by the shrubbery and the low trees among which he had tied them for the day. With his own strong glasses he could study many small traces and trees upon the faces of the neighboring slopes, and it appeared likely that the horses could be seen by a similar survey.

He conducted them deeper into the woods, therefore, and when he had done that, he went back to the summit, moving as cautiously as if rifles, and not merely field glasses, might be picking him off from one of the near-by heights. There on the top, he continued to scan all of the landscape around him.

All was crystal clear. The wind had fallen away again, as it had done in the early evening. There was not a trace

of dust and there was not a breath of mist, not so much as would have stained the face of a mirror. So he could see ten thousand details with his naked eye, but he preferred to study the important points with the glass. It was a lesson in patience to watch him probing every suspicious patch of shadow which might be a cave mouth, and every oddly shaped boulder. Once his heart leaped into his mouth, for he indubitably saw something stir on the shoulder far down a southern peak. Yet when he fixed the glass upon the spot, he could make out that it was no more than a deer, walking, and then trotting softly out of sight among the stones.

He waited to make sure that the creature had not been moving because danger was coming behind it, but nothing more came in sight for a full quarter of an hour, and he relaxed his vigilance in that direction.

Still he was by no means at rest, for a twitching of the nerves and a peculiar keenness in his senses and a vague shadow of fear continually disturbed him, like the pressure of another mind upon his own. He was no believer in metapsychosis, but he told himself that all was not well.

And at length, turning his attention from the distance to the summit on which he stood, he found first-hand evidence that danger actually was around him. For in a patch of soft earth at the very edge of a rock, he saw the distinct outline of a shoe—heel and sole—and such a shoe as he himself never had worn in all his days.

CHAPTER V

PLEASANT was no typical cowpuncher. Above all, he refused to crowd his feet into the narrow-toed and high-heeled boots which may hold a stirrup well enough but which leave one floundering on dry land like some foolish amphibian. He searched hastily for more signs, but he who had made that impression had done the rest of his walking with the greatest of care upon the rocks, so that no spoor remained. It was possible that the footmark might have been made days and days before, preserved there in the softness of the ground. Pleasant dropped on his knees and pored over the imprint. However, he could see the small, wiry grasses, some no larger than a dowl, gradually raising themselves—a small, stealthy movement, yet it told him what he wanted to know: that the man who trod there had been on the mountain surely during the night!

Perhaps he was still here, lurking behind the rocks, hidden in the brush; perhaps he had gone down to warn his companions that Black Mountain was occupied; perhaps at this moment he was in the act of stealing the two horses! In a panic, Pleasant hurried to them and breathed more easily as he stood between them, glaring about at every shadow; and whatever fear was in him was accented by the idle curiosity of the horses, lifting their heads and nudging him with their soft muzzles.

He picked up a saddle, and slowly equipped each of the horses for the trail, fighting out his own problem as he did

so. But he could see no purpose in immediate flight. If hostile eyes were watching the summit, what could be easier than for them to spot him if he tried to get down with two horses? So he decided to wait for night, which would give him another chance at the signal sending—and the earning of the thousand.

It was a mortally long and weary day; his rifle was never out of his hand while he gathered the second pile of brush, making it even larger than the first; and every time a branch crackled in his hands, he paused to listen and to watch.

The dull eternity of the afternoon went by at last and his heart began to return with the dusk. As the shadows deepened, he strained his eyes the more through his glass, for with the coming of evening his enemies, whoever they might be, were more apt to show themselves. All the side of Black Mountain which he could view he scanned, and studied to blindness the hollows at its base with never a sign of man or horse.

So the darkness grew and once more he was standing in the rose of the afterglow in an upper world above the flat fields of the night. Again he kindled the fire, taking care, this time, to apply the match to a section of dry leaves and twigs; his reward was an instant up-burst of flame and in a few moments the shaking arm of red was brandishing above Black Mountain. It was at its very height when an eye of crimson looked at him across the valley from a lower peak—one that he had noted before as being no rock-mass but rather a great cromlech of piled stones. That winking point of light towered presently into a bonfire, and the moment he was sure of it, Pleasant flung on his own blaze a few large rocks and then a tarpaulin loaded with pebbles and carefully gathered sand. His blaze was not extinguished save at one side,

but into the sand he thrust the little metal matchsafe and then sprang back to the heads of his horses.

He had kept them behind a bowlder so that when he retreated to them he would be in shadow from his fire, and here he waited a moment, his heart beating fast. All below him the slope was regularly studded with big rocks like the crenelated top of a wall, and through one of the embrasures he now saw a shadowy form moving swiftly upward. Another shadow appeared beyond a second opening between the great stones, and Pleasant could guess that he had not seen all of the party. Leading the horses, he hurried to the farther side of the peak and there he saw nothing immediately beneath him. It was the roughest and least practicable way down the slope, but he knew that he must go that way. So he sprang into the saddle on the mare. She had the quick, sure footing that was most useful for such work as this. The gelding he cast loose, well knowing that that good natured and faithful animal would follow him unless a bullet stopped it.

Then, not twenty yards behind him, he heard the rolling of a rock and a stifled curse. That was his signal. The least touch of the spur sent the good mare forward and he urged her like a bounding stone, headlong down the steep slope.

No men on that side? She had not made three strides when two voices shouted at him from a clump of shrubbery to halt. For answer, to unsettle their aim, he tried a snapshot above their heads and in return two rifles clanged.

He heard not even the whistle of the bullets; the mare did not wince, and by that he knew that he had gone by unscathed.

No men on that side?

He heard a half dozen—they seemed a half hundred to

Pleasant as a crescent fear mastered him—shouting to one another: "It's Long Tom Rizdal! This way! Shoot, shoot, for God's sake! Watch for him, you below!"

So they yelled. From behind rocks and bushes the odd shadows leaped out and rifles swung in a long gleam to their shoulders. But they had only the night to shoot by, and they were firing at a target that moved downward like an avalanche. As well be crushed in the jaws of rock as in the jaws of the law, it seemed to Pleasant; moreover, the mare had gained such momentum that it seemed impossible to stop her. She darted through a broken maze of boulders and brush, grazing death a score of times, and so came to a long plunge of stone rubble and gravel. Sitting well back on her haunches, she tobogganed down the fall; and at the bottom of it the gelding with a snort of fear shot past them, staggered as he reached more level going, and then tumbled head over heels. He was up again like a cat, and galloping at the side of the mare across the lower reaches of Black Mountain; all the noise was far behind them, and it came from men on foot!

So Pleasant rated the mare at an easy canter. They had descended the upper parapet of the mountain—when he looked back it seemed a sheer wall—and they were dropping more gradually now into the hollow of the valley. Danger, no doubt, was safely distanced, but if enemies lay before him they now would have something better than starlight to shoot by, for a treacherous moon now stood up on the shoulder of an eastern peak and turned the valley pale. It was an open stretch, only cross-hatched by low-lying streaks of brush. The slope was not sharp and Pleasant made the grade easier by running quartering down it towards the bottom of the valley; the footing was good; and the mare ran kindly with

the gelding high-headed beside her, apparently none the worse for his fall.

Nevertheless, Pleasant checked her, and sitting still in the saddle he cupped his ear against the wind and listened. The rabbit is a foolish creature, but it knows that the hearing often may be trusted beyond the sight; Pleasant had learned this trick from the cotton-tail and now his caution quickly rewarded him, for straight before him, muffled as they came up the wind, he heard the dull beating of hoofs.

He twitched the mare about and barely had started her north when half a dozen riders bent around the foot of Black Mountain in single file and came pouring after him. A full gallop could not drop them; glancing over his shoulder he saw them gaining, so he settled the mare into a racing stride. With flattened ears she steadied to her work; the gelding, despite his empty saddle, was jerked away to the rear, and for a full mile they flew before Pleasant looked back again and chuckled grimly when he saw the gap he had opened.

But he kept her at her labor until her head began to come up and the gelding drew alongside once more. Then—he had practiced it many a time—he changed to the saddle of his spare horse.

Two horses are better than one. The posse rode gallantly and well, regardless of broken ground, tearing thorns, and dangerous, sharp-edged rocks that reached for them on either side; but they failed behind the good gelding. He was warmed and ready, by this time, and in half an hour up the hard grade of White's Ravine he left the pursuit out of hearing, out of sight. Pleasant began to take the worst up-pitches at a walk; he knew that he was saved. And whether or not the six threw up their work on the spot or toiled vainly in his rear, he had no further sight of them.

All night he headed steadily through the lower valleys and into the foothills. There, at dawn, he made camp, slept for three hours, and took up the trail again. In the dusk of that evening he made the head of Fisher's Valley, and so came to his own lower gate. The weary horses pricked their ears, and with a lighter step they climbed the last path. Before the barn Pleasant dismounted, unsaddled, and then stood awhile smoking a cigarette and looking genially forth upon the world. The sky was a dark blue bowl touched with points of gold, and nowhere within the lips of that broad grail, he felt, was there a happier man than he.

He listened to the eager munching of the tired horses as they fell to upon their oats, grinding their teeth down against the bottom of the feed box. Above his head a bat with staggering flight followed the swarming insects. Even for the flittermouse there was a place and a need in this best of all possible worlds.

And a thousand from twenty-five hundred left fifteen hundred to go!

Well, that was only a step, and once the debt was raised, he promised himself a little ease and pleasure instead of endless labor, endless thought; he could trust himself in a poker game now and again, perhaps; he could grant himself the joy of drawing the plans, at least, of the new and big house; he could start work upon the valley road, now so full of bogs and pitches; and he could buy that pair of pearl-handled guns in the window of Cross-Thomas & Hardy's store!

He felt very tired; he felt the honest satisfaction that only comes with weariness and labor well ended, and so he walked slowly towards his shanty with no shadow whatever upon his conscience.

CHAPTER VI

THE following morning, he sent in Pedro with the thousand dollars to the bank. He knew that Pedro loved money and that a thousand dollars would be to him as a million to another, but he also knew that Pedro feared his master more utterly than he feared death. He merely scribbled a note to send along, a note to the great banker saying that he wished to have this coin deposited not in his drawing account but against the mortgage. In the meantime, he had other work at hand on the ranch, requiring his presence, and having been away from active labor for such a long time, he was hungry to fill his hands. It is one thing to labor for hire; it is another to be occupied with one's own possessions, renewing this, creating another, whether it be a broken fence or a new manger. So, from a cloud of dust of his own raising within the barn, he looked up from no jerry-built manger which he was completing and saw that he had guests—two at the rear door of the barn, and another couple striding down towards him.

Suddenly Pleasant leaped out of the manger and sat on the edge of it, alert. One of those visitors was Sam Lee, Federal Marshal for the district!

"Well, Sam," said he, "what are you trailing through my diggings?"

Sam Lee was a little man, rather withered, ever smiling; one never caught him with a serious expression, so that to some people his smile seemed a grimace.

He came at his meanings, wherever possible, by dint of many circumlocutions and he was so almost femininely gentle that strangers were apt to despise him. Pleasant never could make a mistake like that but once—it was after his old bunkie, Dill Peters, was arrested for running guns into Mexico—he had stood in the street of Fisher Falls and damned Federal Marshal Sam Lee and all his kin for ages back and dared the marshal to step out into the street and begged him to come with rifle, shotgun, or revolver, he cared not which. Sam Lee had not stepped forth; he never sought quarrels; he merely accepted them in the line of his work, and when some fool asked him why he did not face Pleasant: "Because I'm afraid, of course," said the marshal with his smile.

That speech and that answer had been repeated to Pleasant, and he was well aware that the marshal did not love him; which was now his reason for bringing himself on guard with such abruptness out of the manger.

"I'm a mortal weary man, Jim," said the marshal, pausing to pass a red and white bandanna across his forehead. "I'm dragged back and forth across the country the way you wouldn't work a dog, and I'm going to quit, I am. I ain't gunna stand it no longer."

"Sit down and rest your feet," suggested Pleasant, not a whit off guard. "You boys sit down, too."

The two from the rear door had sauntered inwards and now were joining the marshal. They were exactly the type that Sam Lee loved to use, low-bred, black-browed fellows, rejoicing in the terror they inspired, and hating those who feared them not.

Sam Lee accepted the invitation with a grateful wave of the hand; but the other three did not stir. Their gloomy eyes

remained fixed upon the rancher with the never filled hunger of kestrels. Fear began to grow stronger in Pleasant Jim but he maintained his insouciant air. Besides, even if there were four of them, he wore two guns; he could use them both; and every man of these knew his skill.

"And what you been doing, Sam?" he asked, as Lee settled himself on the barley bin.

The marshal sighed and shook his head, which thrust forward on his skinny neck as his back slumped into a curve of weak relaxation. He looked more like a bird than like a man; or if a man, more a beggar than an important and well-paid official. For he was famously ill-garbed and careless of his clothes. It was said that one suit had lasted the hard-riding little man a full ten years and the garments he wore now looked the part for the kirkah or no dervish ever was more full of patches.

"I been chasing, and chasing," said the marshal, "and I got nothing to show for it. Riding my head off after ghosts, you might say. I kind of think I'm getting old!"

"Chasing what?"

"At Black Mountain," said the sheriff—was it possible that he brought out the words rather more quickly and sharply?—"I was trying to run down a job!"

Pleasant Jim rolled a cigarette, but his eyes never left the face of the marshal. He nodded with interest.

"That's rough country," said he. "What sort of a job?"

"The worst kind," said the officer gravely. "Someone hooked up with that snaky devil, Tom Rizdal, that smart, gun-running hound! I went for a man, but all that I got was this!"

And he took from his pocket a small, metal matchbox and showed it; opened it, and shook the matches out into his

hand. Then his bird-like eyes flashed up at the face of Pleasant Jim.

He could see the latter only through a cloud of smoke, that moment puffed forth.

"Maybe you can find the gent that owned it," said Pleasant. "That ought to be a clew to a smart fellow like you, Sam."

"The gent that owned it? Oh, Rizdal owned it, of course. And what good are clews so far as he goes?" went on Sam Lee with much bitterness. "He's a ghost; fades out into solid stone, you might say; got his friends salted away in every corner of the hills; fellows that would sell their skins for him; Chuck, here, was one of them, till I showed him the light."

He hooked a thumb at one of the three black-browed men, and the rascal grinned sourly.

"Well," said Jim, "I don't suppose that matches tell much of a yarn, at that."

"Don't you?" murmured the marshal. "No, you wouldn't—a good, square, honest, law-abidin' fellow like you wouldn't tink much of 'em, Pleasant, but me, I been forced to be suspicious of everything, y'understand? So I put these matches under a glass and what you think I seen?"

Jim was frozen with interest.

"Little pricks all running down the sides of 'em. Telegraphic letters, you see; and arranged in code; maybe ten words on one of those little matches. Well, well, the tricks that the crooks are up to!"

He shook his head in sad wonder; and Pleasant Jim swallowed hard.

"We pelted after him that left this matchbox on the top of Black Mountain," continued the sheriff, "but he skinned

right away from us. He had two horses, and none of us had more'n one. Right through the hands of about twelve men he slipped, and then walked away and thumbed his nose at six of us that tried to bag him down in the valley. It was a good trick, eh? Enough to make the reputation of any—crook. And the way those horses of his ran was a caution. I never hope to see their like again—unless it was right here on your fine hoss-ranch, Pleasant!"

The blow came quickly and sharply home, but Pleasant Jim stirred not a muscle of his face. In the little pause that followed he felt their four pairs of eyes upon him, and the wind blew sweetly in to them the fragrance of the jessamine that grew at the corner of the corral fence.

"Yes, I'd like to match any pair that runs in these parts," observed Pleasant Jim. "You had a hard ride, Sam?"

"When I seen him going like a bird, I just pulled up and knew that the game had gone bust. Back I comes to Fisher Falls with nothin' but a matchbox to show for the work of nigh twenty men for two days; and no sooner back in Fisher Falls than I get more work to do. A different kind. I go past Mr. Tucker, the cashier of the bank; he's setting under the marquee on his front porch during the noon hour. And he says: 'What you think of this?' and he handed me a little envelope. This here one."

Sam Lee took the envelope, accordingly, from his pocket, and from it he took a little sheaf of greenbacks—even at the distance Pleasant could see the corner figures—one hundred dollars. His throat became exceedingly dry; he could not help measuring the distance to the door, and now he noticed that the three deputies had arranged themselves with care so that they blocked his way to either exit.

"This here money," said Sam Lee, "looks good, it feels

good, and it's printed with a lot of care, but the trouble is that it's queer, y'understand? And I come out here to ask you where you got it, Pleasant."

There was not even a rising inflection of the voice as he asked that question, but the shock to the other was just as great.

"Is that my money?" he asked hoarsely. "Lemme see!"

"It's your money," said the marshal softly. "There ain't any doubt about that, because as soon as the cashier seen it, he labeled it quick and put it right back into the sealed envelope that you'd sent it in. There couldn't be any doubt about that. And so the main thing is just to find out where you got this coin? What horses have you been selling lately, Pleasant?"

Pleasant Jim raked his invention. Absurd fancies leaped into his mind. He would say that it was paid to him for an old debt; he would say that he had received it through the mail; he would say—well, he would say anything rather than that he had taken this money for work performed at the bidding of famous Tom Rizdal. The marshal, having finished his own jeremiad, waited.

He said quietly: "Think it over; let's have the real facts, Pleasant."

"Matter of fact," said Pleasant Jim, "that money came to me through the mail."

"When?"

"There was a batch waiting for me when I got back from the Charlie Rizdal trail."

"A fine, proud job you done on that trail," said the marshal. "Well, it come while you was away? Maybe you saved the letter that it come in?"

"No."

"An old debt, I guess?" said the sympathetic marshal.

"Yes."

"Lucky devil!" sighed Sam Lee. "I would wish to be picking a thousand out of the mail, some day. But I got to wait and work for my coin!"

The voice of the marshal was almost lachrymose. "What was the money owed you for?"

"Oh, a couple of horses that I sold a while back."

"Two?"

"Yes."

"They must of been bang up fine ones for that price! Eh? Which ones was they? I've knowed most of your stock since you set up. Ah, it was that pair of bays that you sold two years back to . . ."

"No," said Pleasant Jim.

"No? Lemme think! Five hundred apiece! Who did you make the sale to, Pleasant?"

"A gent that was passing through; stranger."

"Hello! You give a stranger a couple of fine horses on trust? You're a believin' man when it comes to human nature, Jim. I got to say that!"

So spoke the marshal, gently, but the three assistants grinned widely, their evil thoughts printed plainly upon their faces.

"No, I didn't trust him. He gave me a deposit, y'understand?"

He felt that he was being cornered, but still he was bound to fight well and valiantly.

"Ah, he'd paid some money beforehand. And now a thousand more—and for two horses!"

Pleasant suddenly began to sweat. He felt that the perspiration betrayed him, but he could not prevent it from

rolling down his forehead without wiping his brow with his handkerchief.

"Ay, it's a hot place—this here barn!" said the marshal.

"It wasn't money that he left me. He left me a ring. You see? That was my security. I was to keep it a year, and if he didn't send the money by that time—"

"Was it a year ago that he passed through?"

"Yes. About."

"Along about this time of the year?"

"Yes."

"I thought you said it was two years ago this happened? Sort of seemed to me that you said two, but no matter. It takes a good ring to be worth a thousand, don't it?"

"Sure. This here was a ruby and a grand big one."

"I'd like to have a look at it," said the marshal.

"Can't show it to you."

"You can't. But why not?"

"I sent it away, you see."

"Ah?"

"Yes, sent it away after I got the money."

The marshal nodded in perfect agreement. "Wouldn't want to have a valuable thing like that lying around loose, of course. What sort of a looking fellow was this one?"

"Dark-haired fellow. Very black looking. I suspect Mexican blood. Looked a good deal like Chuck, there."

He could not help sharing his own misery with another, and under this thrust Chuck started and cursed.

"I'll have you know—" he began.

"Pipe down! Pipe down!" said Pleasant Jim smoothly. "I hate loud talk, young man!"

"You, Chuck, shut your face," said the marshal peremptorily. "You'll be getting yourself accused of suicide, one

of these days, if you start in picking fights with men like Pleasant. Doggone me, Jim, if it ain't a shame the way that these kids will shoot off their faces! Now, let's hear some more about the crook that beat you, if you don't mind. Because beat you he has, and trimmed you right out of a thousand dollars. Kind of makes a fellow squirm just to think of it. But you got an iron nerve, old man, and you take your beatings without whining. You remember his name?"

It was jeopardous work; but Pleasant felt that the trail was turning away from him and towards his man of fiction. He went on agreeably enough, his heart warming with his imagination: "Bentley was his name. J. H. Bentley, I think. And his address was some place in Brooklyn; 917 Fourth Avenue, Brooklyn. No, maybe that street address is wrong. I got no head for figures. Maybe I got his address in my note book, though."

"Most likely you have," agreed the marshal. "I'll tell you what, Pleasant, with your help we're going to run down this dirty pusher of the queer! And I hate a counterfeiter worse than I hate any snake! Let's get down again to what he looked like. Middle aged, you said?"

"Yes."

"And gray hair."

"Yes," answered Pleasant.

There was a loud, snarling laugh from Chuck, and Pleasant looked across at the deputy with an eye as cold as iron.

"He looked like me, a minute ago," said Chuck, "and now he's middle aged and got gray hair."

"By jiminy," murmured Sam Lee, "that's right."

He slipped from the barley box.

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain that to the judge,

Pleasant. Mind you, now, you'll probably come out of this, all right; but I'll have to take you in and let you see the judge. And in the meantime, I got to ask you for your guns. It's my duty!"

Had Sam Lee turned into a bristling *loup-garou* at that moment, he could not have seemed a more disgusting or astonishing spectacle to Pleasant.

"Don't draw, boys!" snapped Lee. "Pleasant ain't going to be a fool; he knows that four agin one is too much odds. Besides, he ain't any crook. I know that you just been bamboozled in this counterfeit deal, old son. Just lemme have those guns, will you?"

CHAPTER VII

So Jim Pleasant went to jail. He had a man on either side of him, and two men behind him, and in this fashion they walked their horses down the main street of Fisher Falls.

"Kind of making a little show of me, ain't you?" said Pleasant to the marshal.

Sam Lee turned his head and blinked a little, for the eye of Pleasant Jim, at certain times, was not as kindly as his name.

"Why, Pleasant," said he, "the jail is on this street, ain't it? I could of taken you around the back way, though. Doggone me for not thinking of it! No malice, Jim!"

But malice there was, Pleasant could not help feeling, and he lodged the grudge deep in his heart, where such matters never were forgotten. On either side he had spectators. The blacksmith and both his apprentices ran out, hammer or tongs in hand, to view the procession; Mr. Jackson, the grocer, came to his door with his hands white with flour, and gaped widely, his innocent face turning pale; and trailing behind them, and then running ahead, six, a dozen, twenty boys and girls scampered, shouting, calling, pointing.

Dull red began to rise in the face of Pleasant Jim, and he sat straighter in his saddle; for he felt a weight settling upon him as the ox-bow settles over the neck of the ox. Not faces only, but words were spoken which he never would forget. Men, he thanked his proud gods, dared not say them, but the women found their tongues readily enough, calling to one another from their doorsteps:

"It takes a thief to catch a thief!"

"I knew no good never would come out of him. No good never comes out of a killer!"

He turned grimly to the marshal.

"Did you hear that?"

"Don't you mind 'em, Jim. They think you're down. But you ain't. You been a little careless; that's all. And when you're out, they'll grin at you again."

"They called me a killer. Why, I never killed a man in my life!"

"No?" said the marshal, raising his eyebrows. "I was thinking about the three half breeds that came down from Fort Mason to hunt you—that was five years back, wasn't it?"

"Half breeds!" sneered Pleasant.

"And the Mexicans that cornered you in Phoenix?"

"Maybe you could find a nigger or two to add to the list," said Pleasant angrily, "but I'm talking about white men, Sam! I never killed one in my life!"

"Now, that's a true thing," said the marshal. "Mighty true. There is some that shoot straight enough to kill; but there is some that shoot so much straighter that they don't have to kill. And I wonder, Pleasant, how many fellows you've dropped with a slug through the shoulder or the hip? Yes, sir, that straight shooting of yours has saved many a man his life! Take young Charlie Rizdal, for instance!"

To this the prisoner made no answer, for he suspected that there was more than a touch of irony in the speeches of the marshal. They came before the jail, and over the door, upon the eaves, a maize bird sat, tiling in the wind and eyeing Pleasant Jim, as he thought, like a little red-stained spirit of darkness.

He held back at the door for an instant; but the three deputies closed up instantly behind him; the jailer was standing before him, grinning broadly, and trying to mask his malice behind an insufficient hand. He was too close to the trap and he must enter.

He stood in a little room and had to answer questions: "What was his full name? Where was he born? When was he born? What was his occupation? Had he ever been in jail before and if so for what offense?"

"Hell, Danny," said he to the jailer, "you can answer all those questions about as good as I can. Why do you ask 'em?"

"Matter of form," said the other. "I dunno; I'd get fired if I didn't do it this way."

Pleasant answered grudgingly, for he had an increasing desire to make trouble; but now he was to be searched, and a thorough job they made of it, going through every stitch of his clothes, taking away his knife, his wallet, even his comb.

"It's made of steel," said the jailer in explanation.

"You hound!" exploded Pleasant. "I'll make you sweat for this!"

"Will you?" sneered the other. He stepped up close and looked his prisoner closely in the eye. "You'll sing smaller before you get out of this," he suggested.

For the first time, Pleasant was thoroughly frightened, for since he came to manhood all men in this district had known and feared him; this jailer, for instance, would sooner have twitched the beard of a lion than badgered Jim Pleasant the day before. But now the jailer was something more; he was magnified by the power of the law which lay like a shadow behind him, and out of the excess of that power, he could afford to sneer at his new prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII

THE marshal explained that Pleasant must be lodged not alone, but in a cell with some other prisoner. "I've got a full house, here," he explained. "The sheriff, he's doing quite a business himself, and by the time that I've got through bringing in my free boarders, why, it sort of crowds things. But I'll see that you're fixed up with a good, clean, decent, up-standin' sort of a gent for a cell-mate."

"You're going to shove me into a cell, are you, without letting me talk to the judge and have a hearing?" asked Pleasant, his heart swelling with helpless indignation.

The marshal was full of sympathy.

"I'd like to do it," he explained. "I know just how you feel. Understand exactly! But you don't know the way that the judge is. Everything has to be regular with him; suppose that I went to him and asked him to see you now. 'Is court open? Is this the proper time to bring a man into court? Don't talk like a fool, Marshal Lee!' He has a tongue that a man won't forget in a hurry, Pleasant! I hope you never have to have a taste of it the way that I have!"

The lambent whimsicality of the marshal had no ending; and Pleasant felt that it was useless to try to bring him to a truly serious consciousness.

"Here's a place for him," the marshal was saying. "Here's a man in your jail that's as clean, up-standing, and intelligent as you've ever had here, I suppose. And the best of it is that Pleasant knows him already!"

He had paused before the barred door behind which sat none other than Charlie Rizdal.

"You're going to put me in here?" asked Pleasant, grimly.

"You wouldn't want to be put in with some dirty hobo, would you?" asked Sam Lee. "You wouldn't want that, old-timer, would you? No, you couldn't have a better cell-mate than Charlie Rizdal. Besides, Pleasant, of course it'll only be a day or two before you're out of this!"

Pleasant Jim said no more; he saw that argument was foolish, and now the door swung softly open upon oiled hinges and he had stepped inside. The marshal paused before him.

"If there's anything that I can do for you," he said, "let me know before I go and—"

"There's nothing," answered Pleasant bitterly.

"Hold on!" cried young Rizdal. "Are you going to keep me here with this damned bloodsucker and head-hunter? If you do, by God, I'll throttle him, one of these nights!"

"Friendly, ain't they? Like a pair of Kilkenny cats!" said the jailer, grinning in a broader self-content. "Marshal, you're a wonder!"

"Why, Charlie, I'm surprised at you," answered the marshal with a deprecatory gesture. "Would you want a finer fellow to swap yarns with than Jim Pleasant? Well, boys, so long. Best of luck to you!"

"Mark you me!" shouted Rizdal, leaping at the bars and shaking them furiously. "There'll be trouble out of this! There'll be damned bad trouble!"

The mocking laughter of the jailer floated back at him; Rizdal burst into a passion of cursing that raised a murmur of interest from the adjoining cells; and then, as though realizing that nothing could be gained by mere talk, he

stopped abruptly, and turning towards his companion, who stood stiffly on the defensive, he winked broadly.

Pleasant, amazed, stared at him.

Rizdal continued in a loud voice: "Pleasant, it was you that landed me in this hell-hole; and I'll have your heart out for that little trick, one of these days. They've put us together, now. Well, you keep to that cot and that side of the room; and I'll keep to this; and if you cross the center line, by God, I'll tackle you! You understand?"

"I'm a peaceful man," said Pleasant through his teeth. "I don't hunt trouble. But when it comes my way I aim to use both hands on it; and if you raise a hand on me, Rizdal, I'll break you open like a damned nut!"

A fury of anger had mastered him and his voice as he came to this conclusion; and he was more amazed than ever when, after his outburst, he saw Rizdal nod commendation and smile. The latter sat down on his cot and took from his pocket a little ivory trinket—the roughly worked shape of an ape, which he set up in the palm of his hand and admired for a moment.

When he spoke again, his voice was so carefully modulated that it could reach to his companion, but no farther.

"I knew the old juju would bring me luck before the finish," said he, "but I never guessed that they'd be fools enough to put the pair of us in one cell! Why, Pleasant, we'll crack out of this place almost any time that we want to, now that the two of us are together!"

He added: "But play up, for God's sake. The minute they guess we're pals, they'll separate us. But while they think we want to kill each other, they'll figure that we don't need any guard more than one another. Sam Lee is smart, but here's a trick that he's missed!"

The pleasure of Rizdal was so great that he sat back against the wall of the cell and almost closed his eyes with silent laughter. But his meaning was clear to Pleasant. He answered gravely and softly: "It's all right, Charlie. I'd never stand in your way, but it's not my game to break jail; I couldn't stand outlawry."

"Wait till they're through with you," said Rizdal calmly. "You'll get a new idea!"

With that, he picked up a book which he had been reading, and opening it again, he went through the pages quite rapidly, and now and again he seemed to be making a covert notation with a pencil which he held. Pleasant, however, was tired, rather bewildered, and felt that he had been committed to a trail of which he had no knowledge. So, following his usual rule, he stretched himself on his cot, folded his powerful arms beneath his head, and fell instantly asleep. A rested brain is better than a fagged one, no matter what the emergency.

He dreamed that he was back on the farm again, breaking a colt and trying to make a mouth on it—a fiery, springing, wild-hearted devil of a two-year-old such as he loved to handle. Too much force and the youngster would have a mouth of brass; but just the requisite power and play combined would keep it sensitive and tender as velvet. He had a theory that thought runs down the reins from the hands of the man to the lips of his mount, and so from the human to the equine brain; accordingly, he broke every colt reverently, carefully, with pains and with love, so that the saying arose: "On a Pleasant Jim horse, a wish is as good as a Spanish bit!" But this animal in his dreams was like a winged spirit and a heart of mounting flame; struggle as he

might, he could not rein it; and a vague and vast sense of fear began to oppress him.

He was wakened by the loud voice of Charlie Rizdal, calling: "Hey, you!"

Pleasant Jim wakened with sweat on his brow, and turning his head, he was aware of Charlie at the barred door of the cell, talking to a girl who carried a bucket in one hand and a mop in the other.

It seemed strange to Pleasant that a woman should be allowed in a common jail, but after all, where would a man be found to do the drudgery of cleaning at any ordinary wage; and it was plain that this simple creature could not be offended or give offense. She had a white, rather round face, which possessed a certain prettiness of feature, but her hair was twisted into a tight knot, high on her head, her nose was pink as though from the effect of a perpetual cold in the head; and above all the eye was open, round, blank, unthinking. Never a colt had been foaled on the farm of Pleasant Jim, surely, with so little of spirit. There was scant trace of mind stuff in her; she was body and body alone.

Rizdal spoke to her in a tone of good-natured contempt: "This is a rotten book that you gave me," said he. "Nothing happens in it. Chuck it for me, will you? And here's a quarter. Pick up something that's got a little action, kid! What's your name, anyway?"

"Sally's my name."

"Hey, Sally!" bawled the voice of the jailer. "Ain't I told you not to talk to nobody in here? Come here, you fool!"

Pleasant Jim sat upright on his cot. He was no lover of the ladies, but a certain tone was not permissible when one

addressed them, and now he looked down at his hard knuckles and thought of the broad, soft face of the jailer—a fighting man who had grown pulpy in easy jobs.

“Comin’!” called Sally.

“You poor sap!” shouted Charlie Rizdal. “D’you think I’m trying to make a crush on this cartoon? I just asked her to buy me a book. Here’s the quarter I’m givin’ her. Bite it and see if it’s lead, will you?”

“Swallow your lip, Rizdal!” boomed the jailer. “All right, let her take the quarter. But she’s likely to quit work if she sees that much money all in one piece.”

“Now, Sally,” said Rizdal, “don’t forget.”

“No, sir,” said she.

“And if there’s a nickel left over, buy yourself a ribbon or something.”

“I seen a lovely one in the store for five cents,” said Sally, and she rubbed the back of her hand across her nose and sniffed.

“Run along, kid. Your boss is calling you.”

“Yes, sir,” and away shuffled Sally, the heels of her over-large shoes trailing and scratching on the stone floor as she went.

Mr. Rizdal watched her going, and then he turned sharply on his cell-companion.

“She’s our bet, old man,” he said rather with his lips than with his voice. “Wait till the middle watch, and I’ll tell you why!”

Pleasant smiled again. Never in his life had he seen a tool less likely to be of use for breaking from such a strongly modern jail as this.

CHAPTER IX

IN the hush of the night, Pleasant awakened to a touch on his arm, and the whisper of Rizdal: "Listen, Jim. Are you awake?"

"I'm awake."

"I have the stuff here, now. That gem of a girl—that Sally—she gave me the last installment to-day. I've got the layout complete—the saws, the oil, and all. Shall we start now, Jim?"

Pleasant sat up in the dark; his brain was spinning a little. The faint, sick odor of the jail oppressed his nostrils.

"To cut our way out?"

"What else?"

The thrill leaped down the veins of Pleasant, and he swung an arm through the darkness, like a sabreman making a moulinet.

"But wait a minute; no, I can't do it. It would be junking my life's work. My years on the farm would be chucked, and because of what? Because your brother crooked me with a dirty deal!"

"He'd give a hand to have the doing of that over again."

"How do you know what he'd give?"

"Old fellow, I hear from him every day, and he hears from me. The point is—you won't believe it of a man like Long Tom—he didn't dream that the stuff was queer; it was passed on him by an old pal."

"Well," said Pleasant, thinking the matter over, "I'm inclined to believe that he wouldn't have played the sneak

like that. But I'll pull out of this without jumping into outlawry."

"How? Will you go to prison?"

"Go to prison for what? For riding to Black Mountain and planting a matchsafe in some sand?"

"Pleasant, they know that you carried the safe; now they're trying to make out the code that was used on the matches; and in any event, you can't make them feel that you haven't been deep with Long Tom."

"After my job with you, Charlie? Does that seem like being deep with him?"

"They figure it simply enough. They think that you're sore at me and deep with Tom. That might happen. But I'll tell you, they've written you down one of my brother's men, and you'll see a fiver, for this."

"You mean that they'd send me up for five years?"

"Or ten."

"By God, they can't! It's not justice!"

"They're looking for convictions, not for justice. And by the time that you got out of prison, what would be left of your farm?"

Pleasant, breathing hard, grasped the side of his cot and set his teeth.

"I'll wait and see it through," he declared at last.

"You're a crazy man, Jim."

"I can't chuck the place."

Rizdal was silent, after a time, and then his dim shadow rose and melted away in the darkness as he crossed the floor in his stockinged feet. And Pleasant found that his cot was shuddering like quake ooze beneath him; it was the tremor of his own body that caused the disturbance. He stood up, and mopped his wet forehead. Somewhere in the

jail a prisoner was maundering in his sleep and now and again his voice rose to little mouse-like squeaks of terror, and aimless gibberings.

"That's little Pete Marley," murmured Rizdal, coming back to his cell-mate. "He did a stretch; and it broke his nerve. He was a regular rakehell in the old days, but he's nothing, now. Listen to him crying in his sleep, poor little rat! But prison ain't any sweet song, man."

Pleasant noticed that there was no further attempt at persuasion, and he could not help saying: "If you have the stuff for cutting through, go ahead. I won't make a noise about it."

"Old son," chuckled Rizdal, "Long Tom gave me my marching orders in the book that Sally brought to-day. I'm not to step out of this here jail unless I take you with me; that's his last word."

"How could he send a message in a book?"

"Little system of checking off the words. Very easy when you know the key. We're here together, and he says that he'll never stop working if it takes the rest of his life and every penny of his money until he's got you out of this mess."

He dwelt no longer on the subject, but Pleasant was touched. This was a sort of faith which he could understand.

So he asked about Sally, and it was a subject which seemed a favorite with his companion.

She was, according to Charlie Rizdal, the smartest woman in the entire universe, and of all the associates of Long Tom she was the most capable and the most trusted by her chief. He had sent her into Fisher Falls the instant that his brother was jailed there; and of her own devices she had managed

the disguise which, so quickly, took her into the jail not for an occasional visit, but as a constant worker there.

Pleasant Jim remembered the white, round face, and the blank eyes, and he wondered, for he saw that he had come upon the verge of a world of new things. And deep into the dark of the morning his companion talked, picking out details, painting them with skill and devising before the imagination of Pleasant an existence where joy was merely deliciously spiced with danger, and where all one's chosen companions were true to the death; where there was no labor but play; where the good deed of to-day was never forgotten to-morrow; where men stood to men as brothers.

"Put on quarter boots, Charlie," said the listener, at length. "You're overreaching yourself a little."

"All right, Jim," replied the other. "You'll see that I haven't lied. You'll see when you're one of us."

And as Rizdal went away, Pleasant said gravely to himself that that day never should come. Somehow there was justice in the law; and if he had made one vital error in serving the will of a notorious outlaw, had he not paid enough for the single slip? And had he not been sorely tempted for the mere bearing of a trinket to a mountain top?

The first stroke was not delayed beyond the next day. First, on that day he asked to see the judge and was told that the "old man" had a full day. Secondly, he received a little message from bank president Lewis Fisher, a courteous little note, but one which drove home its point with much precision. Mr. Fisher had come upon evil days, said the note, and he was forced to protect important interests by calling in every outstanding loan. Among the rest, he was sorry that he had to ask for Pleasant's twenty-five hundred,

still outstanding. Of course Pleasant would have no difficulty in raising the money on such a fine property as was his; and Mr. Fisher would not press at once for payment. He would allow three days of grace!

In the meantime, he was sorry to hear of the plight of his young friend, but he knew that Jim Pleasant was far too much a man to have been beguiled into any dealings with that human viper, Tom Rizdal.

So all would come out well in the end.

And was there anything he could do to serve Mr. Pleasant during his confinement?

That letter slipped from the numb fingers of Pleasant and whisked across the floor to Rizdal, who made no pretense of not reading it as he picked it up. Having glanced through the contents, he nodded.

"He'll have the farm in a week, then," said Charlie Rizdal.

"I dunno what you mean," murmured Pleasant. "But it looks queer. How *can* he need money? He's rich—his safe is full of cash securities all the time, as every one knows!"

"Of course it is," remarked the other, "but the old boy has a taste for horses, and of course he's glad not to have to pay for them."

The eye of Pleasant was utterly blank.

"You see, of course?"

"Not a damn thing!"

"Why, they'll foreclose on you, you see? Then they'll auction off everything that you've got!"

"I'd have their blood, if they dared. It's not possible, besides!"

"It's the law, partner!"

Pleasant groaned, but then he took new hope out of despair. "If they wiped out my work, still they'd have to leave me with a good deal of cash!"

"You'll probably get about twenty-five hundred—enough to pay Fisher's note."

"I see," chuckled Pleasant, greatly relieved. "But you don't understand. I was offered twenty thousand dollars flat, no longer than three months back, and I laughed in the face of old Grindle when he made the offer. Well, he'd bid the place up that high, at least. And then he'd have Young, and Chalmers. They would like my farm, too. You see, Rizdal?"

The latter paused to drum his fingers lightly on the edge of his cot.

"You ain't young," he explained to himself, "but just kind of innocent. Why, son, if Fisher started bidding on that place of yours, there ain't a wealthy man in the range that would dare to bid against him."

"Will you tell me why?"

"Because it's understood. They keep their hands off when Fisher goes after something, and then he keeps his hands off when they've got a plum in the wind. So they play for each other. He does the financing—at damned fat interest—and they all get rich. Why, Jim, you didn't think that old Fisher got his coin squarely, did you? He was a money-lender in St. Louis before he came out here—for his health!"

It brought Pleasant to such a nervous tension that for eight days he hardly slept, but walked ceaselessly up and down the cell like an impatient tiger. And the rest of the time, he busily wrote letters—wild appeals to this friend and to that. Ah, how bitterly he wished, now, that he had in-

vested a little more time in human friends, and a little less in horses! For his bosom cronies and old companions were far away, their addresses uncertain, and as for the few he knew here in the valley, what one of them could advance him twenty-five hundred dollars?

In the meantime, he was made to taste the first sting of the law.

CHAPTER X

HE often had passed the judge on the street; they had exchanged cheerful greetings; and he had looked upon the man of the law as rather a good-natured but weak person. On the morning of his examination he changed his mind. It was simply an informal test to discover whether or not the prisoner should remain in jail or be admitted to bail. For Pleasant there appeared a gray-headed lawyer who had dropped into the horizon of Fisher Falls from some far greater city. It was the work of the great Tom Rizdal, of course, which procured such a defender. He sat down with Pleasant and had the entire story straight from him; after which, he frowned sadly. In his opinion, he declared, what Pleasant needed was a fine and a sharp lecture; but he pointed out that it was apt to go very hard with him. In spite of that opinion, he defended Pleasant with vigor and with wonderful skill, but all was no good. The judge battered through all of the frail fences which the lawyer reared and brought down his remorseless finger upon certain disagreeable facts. The fugitive of Black Mountain looked like Pleasant, rode like Pleasant and upon just such horses; and Pleasant himself had been absent from his home, as the Mexican cowpunchers testified, at exactly that time. So much for that, but then there was the matter of the thousand dollars of bad money. Undoubtedly it looked as though Pleasant had allied himself with the famous forger, robber, and smuggler, and counterfeiter, Long Tom Rizdal, or at least the judge was determined that the prisoner should not

slip through his fingers without a thorough trial. He fixed the bail at ten thousand; bail in that sum instantly was offered by the lawyer, but the judge calmly declared that he needed twenty thousand, and that if twenty thousand were brought, he would demand a hundred thousand. In a word, he intended to keep Pleasant in jail until the trial, which was illegal and unfair enough, but the judge was a veteran of the Western bar, which knows odd expedients and makes nearly as much law as it reads! And when Pleasant's lawyer raged and quoted authorities, book and page, the judge sat still and grinned like a mugger on Ganges bank.

"Young man!" said his defender to Pleasant afterwards, "unless I'm very much mistaken, you are in to catch hell for this little tangle."

That was not a cheerful speech, but the lawyer was so well paid and esteemed that he did not have to lie; but the second blow was far more serious than the first. It came not from the court but from the soft hand of Lewis Fisher, for all that Charlie Rizdal prophesied came to pass swiftly and surely, as though he had written out the course to which action must conform.

The news came in the form of a cheerful little note from Lewis Fisher:

"Dear Jim Pleasant,

"How regrettable it all is! Your place was auctioned off this morning and I'm sitting down at your own table this instant to tell you what happened. You will be as astonished as I to learn that although several people came to look on, there really was no bidding whatever. I think that the farm and everything on it would have gone for fifteen hundred. I didn't want the place myself, because as you must know, I

don't want my hands encumbered with different kinds of business. However, I simply couldn't sit by and see your place sacrificed so utterly. It would have left you a thousand in my debt after losing your farm. Therefore I bid it in. What I'll do with it, I don't know. But as soon as you're out of your little difficulties of the present, no doubt you'll agree to manage the property for me. We could arrange a handsome salary, of course. Much more than the usual cow-puncher gets!

"Let me know when I may be of assistance, and believe my heartiest good wishes go with this note.

"Yours most sincerely,

"LEWIS FISHER."

When Pleasant read the thing, he staggered like a horse that strikes poachy ground at full gallop. Then, turning his back sharply upon Rizdal, he went to the window and rested his elbows on the sill. The wall was thick, the window not over large, but through the checking of the bars, he could see a corner of the distant range, three noble heads of white and in the center something like a great shadow. It was Black Mountain again; it seemed to Pleasant Jim that there was something fatal in the very sight or the mere name of the peak.

"Poor devil," said a whisper at his door.

He turned his head in time to hear the rustle of a skirt, and knew that Sally had gone by; Charlie Rizdal was studying the floor; the whole world knew that he was a ruined man! So he stared back through the window again, loving Rizdal for his silence. For an hour he stood by the window, fighting himself, for the passion started somewhere in his

heart and ran up into his brain in thin red lines of fire. He wanted to rush to the bars and see if he might not tear one of them down; once through and armed with such a weapon—The savage joy of the thought choked him.

But he kept fighting, for a voice inside his soul told him that madness was just around the corner of such things as these.

He began to set his hands hard and forced his thoughts away from the farm, for all those thoughts were madness-making. Anything else would do—the way the cotton-wood shook in the wind, yonder, or the manner of that foolish rooster, strutting through the dust and showing the seed or the worm to hens before he ate his prize. However, no matter where he fixed his mind or where he began, presently into his imagination the picture of the little valley farm came back, and the soft-eyed brood mares, and the wild colts, and the “made” horses walked across his mind’s eye—walked across his heart.

The sun dropped lower and turned red in the west, and as its cheeks began to puff out, a ruche of crimson and purple cloud came around it, so that it had the look of a drunken clown in a clown’s collar. At that, Pleasant began to laugh, and turned from the window still laughing until he saw Charlie Rizdal shrink away with fear and horror.

“It’s all right, Charlie,” said he. “I ain’t crazy. I won’t do any harm to you. No, nor to anybody else. Why, hell, I ain’t got the brains to do any harm, for I’m simply a dumb fool that anybody could wrap around their little finger. But, oh, God, Rizdal, one of these days I’m going to get my hands on President Lewis Fisher and I’ll make his windpipe crackle under my thumb.”

"If you want to do that," said Rizdal quietly, "I have the stuff still waiting. We can start to-night to cut through, old man. Or are you going to wait to serve the prison term?"

Pleasant replied with a glance; he dared not trust himself to speech for once his voice began he could not say where it would take him. He was trying to keep himself in hand and steer a straight and manly course; he was trying almost with a physical effort, and it reminded him of the labor of holding the ploughtail steady when the share is in rough ground.

That night they started work with the saws.

What miracles of art were each of the little strips of steel, edged with a diamond hardness, and they ate into the well-proved steel of the window bars almost as though it were wood. Eased with the finest of oil, the little blades still worked on softly and silently, yet now and again there was a thin scream as a flexible blade was stuck in the cut it had made. At those times, the two stopped work, gasping with excitement, but no alarm came to them.

For a full three hours they worked, when it became apparent that they could not finish the task before the morning was on them. It was a double trellis which secured that window, the inner one made of mere strips, the outer of greater bars; and altogether, as Rizdal pointed out, it was a case rather for a work bench and large circular saws than for two prisoners and their sadly cramped fingers. However, they had made good progress, and Rizdal announced that he would send word that they were coming through the next night. As he declared this, he could not help making a little speech on the subject: "You're down, old fellow, I know. But you'll be up before long. You've had a good many things in your life, I know, with plenty of excitement

thrown it, but you've never had friends, Pleasant! You're going to find that you have them now, and that they'll never let you down. Try us before you trust us. You'll find, as the Mexicans say, that when a friend asks there is no tomorrow. Well, Jim, damme if I don't get a little sentimental about it all, but I can't help feeling that the happiest day in your life will be the one when you join up with Long Tom Rizdal!"

There seemed to be no room in the heart of Pleasant even for hope or a kindly touch of excitement; for all his emotions, now, were bitter, savagely straightforward. He was like a dog that has found a blood trail but is held hard upon a leash. Rizdal could not help noticing.

"When you get Fisher—what'll you really do to him?" he asked.

And Pleasant Jim smiled, and then passed the tip of his tongue over his dry lips.

That night they finished the inside cut and lifted out the square segment of the bars; the outer trellis had been cut also, only a few shreds of steel remaining to hold the work in place until the last moment.

Rizdal climbed up with the aid of Pleasant Jim, and his shoulders would not go through the gap! He got down and tried again to wriggle through on his side, but all he managed to do was to tear his coat and bruise his side badly.

He got down again, gasping and groaning until Pleasant had to warn him that he was sure to rouse the whole jail. It was simply clear that they had made a mistake in their measurement. The hole would have to be enlarged; it could not be done in the remainder of that short night; and in the meantime, how were they to replace, for the day, the section which they had taken from the grating?

CHAPTER XI

ANY casual passer-by might glance up from the street and take heed of the gap in the inner bars of that window, and no one could enter the cell without seeing instantly what was wrong. Their reactions, now, were oddly characteristic, for Charlie Rizdal, gritting his teeth, picked up the square of bars and held it into the place from which it had been taken. But Pleasant sat down on his cot and turned the matter gravely in his mind. They had nothing of which a cement of any kind could be made; not even the slightest adhesive substance was in their hands. A possible solution came to him then and they acted upon it instantly, cutting small, thin, wedge-shaped slivers from the legs of the cots and then driving these into two of the opposite cracks which were left when the section had been fitted into place as nearly as possible. The tapping in of one wedge dislodged the sliver at the farther end; a dozen times they failed; the light of the day had commenced long ago; and now a sharp whistling went up the street.

A boy of fourteen or fifteen idled past, his hands in his pockets, all eyes—and therefore how could his glance fail to spot famous Jim Pleasant who was observed in the gray of the dawn with his face at the window, and his hands, apparently, desperately clutching the bars of his window.

“Hello, Jim!” called the passer-by. “Can I do anything for you, Jim?”

Greatly Pleasant strove for some word to say, some casual thing which would dismiss the boy and send him down the

street, but not a syllable could he speak and the youngster, looking up into that fierce and silent face, suddenly was overcome with a nameless fear, and scampered down the street.

Pale and stern-lipped now, the two resumed their efforts. What must be shall be; and the section of grating was in place at last. After that, they gathered dust from the floor, working cement from between the cracks of the stones, and thus they managed to smear the saw cuts with an improvised mud. But how insecure was their work! With every breath of wind that day they expected the grating to fall clanging from its place, and yet they dared not make any further attempts to strengthen the fastenings, for fear lest the very first hammering would dislodge the insecure wedges which held the bars in place.

However, as the hours went past, their confidence returned; and then in the mid-afternoon Jailer Danny Rankin suddenly appeared before them and said sullenly: "What was you doing at the bars of that window this morning, you—Pleasant?"

"I was looking at the sky and the street and wishing I was out of this damned hole. What else?" said Pleasant.

"I got almost an idea that you—" began Danny Rankin, and he walked straight towards the window. Pleasant turned too white and sick to speak, but Rizdal called: "Rankin! Come here, will you?"

At the abrupt challenge, Rankin turned and scowled.

"What in hell is biting you?" he asked amiably.

"I'm fed up with this cell," said Rizdal, falling into an apparent passion. "I'm fed up, I tell you, and worse than that I'm tired of this here wooden Indian, Pleasant. I tell you, he looks at me like a snake at a rabbit, as if he'd like

to swallow me. One of these nights I'm going to brain him—and it'll be self-defense—I warn you beforehand!"

"What happens to either of you," said the uncourteous Rankin, "ain't a bit of difference to me, or how you get yourselves knocked on the head or hung. But you," he added, turning and pointing a stubby finger at Pleasant, "you quit tryin' to scare the kids in the street! Now mind you, I run this jail, and I'm gunna keep a hand over everybody!"

So saying, still scowling over his shoulder, he turned and walked from the cell. Pleasant leaned back against the wall, almost overcome, his heart hammering, and his breath gone. But the peril of the moment was past, and now they could prepare for the new effort.

A new book came for Rizdal that afternoon, interleaved with new saw blades! Pleasant wondered at the carelessness of Rankin in allowing such a traffic, but after all it was the stupid eye of Sally that disarmed suspicion. As she passed in the book she murmured—and Pleasant heard it: "You've bluffed too hard. Rankin will separate you to-morrow. To-night or never, Charlie!"

Dusk had scarcely fallen when with Rizdal watching at the door, Pleasant fell vigorously to work making the new cut. Too vigorously, for at the second stroke, a saw blade snapped, and fell tingling into the yard below them. For a desperate five minutes they waited; then rapid steps came up the jail aisle towards their cell—with set faces the two stared at one another, feeling that the end had come. But the steps passed briskly by, and Pleasant refitted a blade and began work once more.

By midnight the cut was complete, and taking down the inner bars, with a bed leg they pried away the outer ones which were secured only by the threads of steel which they

had left after their cutting. Rizdal had prepared two blankets knotted together, and it was he who slipped through the window first and dropped to the ground below. Pleasant followed, and they moved softly around to the rear of the building. There, standing close in the shadow of the wall, they took stock of their surroundings.

A rear window was lighted and threw a broad shaft of illumination across the backyard of the building, dimly sketching the outlines of the tree-masses beyond. The night was warm; many people were still up, as the lighted houses showed, in spite of the fact that it was midnight; and in this little, waking city, a sudden alarm sounded from the jail behind them—a loud shouting, and then the trampling of feet. The front door was cast open, and voices descended into the open night.

Rizdal took the lead, and brought them quickly into the deep shadow of the trees.

"Now horses?" asked Pleasant. "Have you thought of that, Charlie?"

"Don't worry," replied the other. "You don't have to. We've done our part. Long Tom will have to do the rest."

"But where shall we go?"

"Not a step from here. I sent word that we'd be here about midnight. Here we are, and that lets us out, of course. But—"

There was a rush of three horsemen down the street, shouting wildly that the jail was broken, and calling on every man to arm for the pursuit. "They'll have us like fish in a net," suggested Pleasant nervously.

"Here comes our help now," answered Rizdal, and through the shadows beneath the trees came two men, each leading a span of saddled horses. "It's Christy," went on

Rizdal with satisfaction. "We couldn't have a better man. Christy! Here we are!"

Mr. Christy, a short and broad-built silhouette, said with unnecessary loudness: "Tumble aboard, mates. Here, Charlie, this is for you. And here's something special for Pleasant."

Pleasant Jim, in the very act of taking the reins and throwing himself into the saddle on a big gray horse that was led to him, checked himself with an exclamation. "By the Eternal and seven thousand devils!" said Pleasant. "It's the Leinster Gray! Tell me, how did you—"

"Take now and talk later," urged Christy. "Give way, boys. We got to cut out of this town; it's beginning to swarm for us!"

There seemed to be fifty men who had responded to the call of the jailers and who had saddled horses and turned themselves into wild cavalry at a moment's notice. They were scurrying everywhere; the acrid alkali dust began to taint all of the air; and Pleasant heard the sharp, almost whining voice of Marshal Sam Lee raised like a piercing trumpet, calling every one together to take his orders and so organize the search.

"Take it slow and easy," urged Pleasant. "Ride up the street with the first swarm of gents that passes. They'll never recognize us in the dark."

So they came out of the trees and joined a flurry of riders who were pounding hard through the dust. And one of them merely called: "What's up?"

Christy answered in stentorian tones: "Rizdal and Pleasant Jim have busted jail, and hell is loose!"

The riders went on; behind them passed the four, turned to the side through the first alley—and "Who's there!"

called a voice, and a shadow stepped from the brush into the alleyway with the long barrel of a rifle thrown across his forearm and all the bearing of one prepared for war.

"Get out of the way!" called Christy. "Pleasant and Rizdal have escaped and rode this way."

The other drew unwillingly back.

"I dunno how they could of got by here," he said. But they already were sweeping by him when he shouted: "Jim Pleasant! Halt!"

Something in the outline of Pleasant's head and shoulders against the stars had betrayed him, but the rifleman had made his discovery too late, for the long arm of Jim Pleasant reached for him as a piston reaches in its stroke. The rifle exploded, to be sure, but it was fired blindly and the sentry fell with bleeding face and half-numbed brain in the thick dust.

The four went on.

The racing gallop of the horses pushed Fisher Falls at once behind them; before them they had the narrowing cañon of the upper valley, with the mountains drawing in on either side like arms prepared to gather up the fugitives, so that to Pleasant the jagged outlines of the peaks seemed more delightful than the form of a familiar home. They meant freedom to him; but more eloquent than the sight of the open mountains, almost enough to redeem all of the pains and the losses which he had suffered was the sweeping gait of the horse which carried him, not as with beating wings but like wings. Freedom? He felt that never before had he been free like this, like an eagle! And looking back over his shoulder down the white line of the river, he almost was sorry that he saw no dimly following forms like hawks beating vainly upwind after the king of the air.

CHAPTER XII

THEY turned from the main valley through a narrow-floored ravine, and up this they rode in the center of a little stream. It was great labor for the horses and required an hour for a single mile, but though they frequently fell saddle-deep into holes, and though there was great danger that a horse might break a leg or ruin a hoof on the sharp rocks in the bed of the stream, they stuck to their purpose, for this was a gap in the trail which would defeat the pursuit even if they took dogs up the line.

They left the creek where it diminished to a mere runlet, and bearing to the east up a winding cattle trail, they came in the gray of the morning to a spacious plateau sowed with rocks, clustered with many trees, but affording many patches of excellent grazing land where cattle were scattered and some already browsing. In the midst was a farm-house and Christy, who had maintained the lead, bore boldly ahead for it. Pleasant anxiously asked Rizdal if this were not folly but he was reassured. The farmer was "right" and had been well bribed long before. He was a Rizdal station, so to speak, and Pleasant learned, what he had guessed before, that Long Tom made no effort to work the country with a lone hand. Instead, he made a point of making friends here and there where he could find an outlying small farmer or trapper and hunter who spent much work for small cash returns. These were the hostleries patronized by the long riders of the gang, where food and lodging was paid for at a handsome rate and

always in hard cash and where, besides, a small present of money was sure to be seed falling on fertile ground. All that was required of these "station agents" was that they should see nothing, hear nothing, know nothing. Among their mustangs were sure to be found a few horses of a different breed, longer of leg, cleaner of cut, and if those horses were occasionally "borrowed," other animals were left in their place, usually worn down by hard traveling.

The farmer welcomed the party with a grin and a wink and sent his son to go hunting at the head of the ravine and keep a sharp lookout for any pursuit that might head that way. The wife, in the meantime, went into the kitchen to cook, and presently four hungry men sat down to a table covered with fried ham, with baking-powder biscuits, and great cups of coffee.

Over the last cup of coffee and Bull Durham cigarettes, Rizdal completed his introductions.

Christy appeared in the morning light as a sort of pugilistic type, low-browed, deep-chested and with extraordinarily long arms. And Rizdal said of him: "Here's Joe Christy, Jim. He's what Tom calls an all-around man. He can blow a safe, or use a can-opener; he can make soup and use it; he can work inside or out, and if it comes to a pinch, he handles a gun the way that you admire. Now here's Lefty. I dunno just what to say about Lefty. Lefty, what would you say for yourself?"

Lefty was just the opposite of his stocky companion. Pale and thin of face, with lank black hair falling over his forehead, he had a detached and somewhat superior air, and his dull, dark eyes wandered slowly here and there and seemed to see nothing. He was like an artist, whose thoughts are lost

in dreams rather than in realities, and like the hands of an artist, his fingers were long and slender, with little strength but much active deftness.

He smiled faintly at the question of Rizdal, but said nothing to explain himself, and the other continued: "Lefty has a talent for listening to a combination and then telling you what's in its mind. You could duplicate the rest of us, but you couldn't duplicate Lefty. In addition, Lefty shoots a little straighter than almost any one else, except Tom or you, Pleasant. That's why he was asked to ride down with the party this evening."

This praise did not seem to be noticed by the pale man, who was lost in an aimless reverie, while Rizdal went on: "Boys, you know Jim Pleasant; everybody does in this part of the range. It was Jim who put me behind the bars and he might have landed the rest of us there if it hadn't been that the fools who could have used him decided that they'd double-cross him. Well, they'll have to pay through the nose for that, and they'll begin to pay pronto. Now, fellows, I know you, and I know Jim. I tell you that he's a man to take to; and I tell you, Pleasant, that Lefty and Joe never will let you down in a pinch. Mix up a bit and get to know one another. It'll pay you in the long run."

Pleasant cleared his throat.

"I like straight talk," he observed, "and I'll give you some. You fellows have taken me out of jail. I'm grateful for what you've done, but I'm not going to throw in with you. I've worked for my living, and it's too late for me to switch callings. What you do for yourselves is all very well. What I do for myself has to be something else. I can't try the new dodge."

In this statement he received sudden confirmation and encouragement in the vigorous voice of Mr. Christy: "There ain't any fool in the world," he declared, "like the sap that goes crooked when he can go straight."

"Sure," agreed Charlie Rizdal. "You're talking like a book, Joe. The point is: How is this bird going to fly straight, again? After busting jail, I mean? Or is he going to take the sentence for pushing the queer on top of the sentence for jail-breaking? Gimme an answer, Joe!"

Joe had no answer. Neither had Jim Pleasant, and the conversation ended for the moment when Rizdal added kindly: "You make up your mind any way that you want to jump, because nobody's going to press you here. Tom thinks the whole world of you and he'd be the last man to want to drag you into anything."

After breakfast, they went to bed, assured by the farmer that fresh horses would be saddled and ready for them, and a strict watch kept in case there should be any need for a hasty departure. "Except," he added, "I guess that the gent that has the gray wouldn't want to change him for another?" And he looked at big Pleasant partly in admiration and partly in malice and envy.

On the way to the beds, upstairs, Pleasant asked cautiously: "What price, Charlie, would your brother put on the gray?"

"Price?" smiled the other. "Why, man, the horse is yours, of course. And by the way—there'll be a thousand of clean money for you, as soon as Tom arrives!"

So Jim Pleasant lay down on the bed which was assigned to him, but he could not sleep at once. In his brain and in his blood was the thought of the gray, hauntingly persistent;

for he knew good horses and had lived, in a way, to make them. But never before had he had such a mount between his knees.

By noon he was up and left his three companions snoring while he wandered downstairs and out to the pasture. There were six well-bred ones there, but the seventh was the gray. There were six horses of bone and substance with eyes like deer and muzzles which, like the horse of the Arab poet, could drink from a pint-pot; but the seventh was the Leinster Gray. With hungry eyes he devoured the proportions of the tall stallion. Looked at from behind, his quarters seemed too broad and gross, like the driving muscles of a draught animal; but viewed from the side that sense of overweight disappeared. Beautifully balanced, made like a watch for fineness, he possessed sixteen hands and a half of go and stamina, and yet Pleasant knew that the big fellow was as neat-footed as a cat.

This horse, worthy of a king, had been given to him off hand by a thief, a smuggler, a bank robber! It set his blood on fire, for the possibilities of such a man were limitless, it appeared to Pleasant.

In a short time, the others appeared, Christy and Rizdal to lounge about, but Lefty withdrawing himself to the shade of a tree where he unwrapped a small bit of machinery and began to work with it, his ear bent close to it, his eyes half closed like one listening to the most delicious music. Christy explained to Pleasant:

"That's a new combination. Loves it, don't he? My God, I've seen him spend a hundred hours listening to the tumblers fall! Burglar proof the saps who made that lock call it—the greatest invention in the world for beating the wise boys; but God help the joint that trusts to that lock

when old Lefty lays hands on it! He's readin' its mind, and look at him! Ain't he hearing a pretty story?"

But Pleasant left them and went back to the pasture. He was sitting on the fence, and the Leinster Gray was eating sugar from his hand when Long Tom Rizdal appeared in the middle afternoon. He came on a strong bay, blackened with sweat and chafed to foam across the shoulders where the reins had been rubbing. He gave hardly a word to Christy but drew his brother aside.

"How did he go?" asked Long Tom.

"Steady as a clock," answered Charlie Rizdal. "Twice I thought we were beat. It was Pleasant's game that pulled us through. You were right about him, Tom, but I don't think he'll throw in with us. There he is now—more interested in a horse than in the rest of us."

Long Tom thrust out his underhung jaw a little and narrowed his eyes, as though he were looking at the spirit of Pleasant rather than his body.

"You don't understand, Charlie," said he. "You've talked horse and money to him. He needs something else!"

And he went straight to Pleasant and took his hand: "Pleasant, you've been put in hell because of a boner that I pulled. Now you're out, tell me what you want to do?"

"What can I do?" asked the latter rather bitterly. "I've got the law after me!"

"Horses are your job, aren't they?"

"They are."

"Then pick some spot where there's good grass and water. Change your name, and buy the land and stock it with the cash that I'll give you. No man ever lost money through me, and I'm not going to let you be the first. You've lost twenty thousand dollars, Pleasant. You can have thirty

from me. Grow a mustache and a beard and talk through your nose; you'll never be spotted, hardly."

"And let Lewis Fisher sit down and laugh at what he did to me? No," exclaimed Pleasant, "they'll have me for murder before I'll let him do that!"

CHAPTER XIII

LONG TOM sat down on a tree stump and picked a Colt forty-five from the spring-holster beneath his arm-pit; he began to pass it over his finger-tips, lightly, dexterously, bringing it to point on a white-faced stone twenty yards away; and again and again as he talked the gun covered the mark and recoiled again on the sensitive fingers. Pleasant Jim followed the gun movements with understanding eyes, for he himself had indulged in hours and hours of that not unmeaning play; so that while they spoke the two, no matter to what they were giving their minds, appeared to concentrate all of their attentions on the six-shooter.

"Old Fisher sticks in your craw, then?" said the smuggler. "Well, I'm not surprised. You're not the stuff that lies down when it's kicked, after all. But gun-work—is that the thing for him?"

Pleasant was silent.

"Take a look at him," said Rizdal. "Suppose that you walked in and blew him full of holes. He deserves shooting. Sure he does. Of all the dirty crooks in the world, he's the lowest, because he's the sort that never takes a chance; he never works without having the law between him and trouble. Well, I know of gents that killed themselves because that was all that Fisher left for 'em to do. But suppose you drop him, what's happened? He's got nothing except death, and death comes to everybody some day. He'd leave his money and his land and his work behind him for that chalk-faced sneak of a nephew of his to inherit; and there'd still be the

statue in the square to the founder of Fisher Falls. What sort of a real revenge would that be? They'd simply make him out a martyr and write books about the great pioneer!"

Mr. Rizdal spat in the dust, and as though overcome with his disgust and his anger, he fired the Colt suddenly; a sharp shoulder of the white-faced rock disappeared.

Pleasant listened intently, leaning forward a little, his eyes upon the gun but his thoughts in another place.

"Suppose, though, that you were to snake the soul out of that fat-faced hound and leave him alive to groan and yell? That would be something like, Pleasant. You agree?"

"What's his soul?" asked Pleasant Jim bitterly.

"I dunno just how much there is of it," replied the other with a smile, "but I can tell you where it lives. It's in the big safe at the end of his private office where he keeps his cash and his securities—not the stuff of the people that have deposited in his bank, but his own. They got their loot in an old cast-iron box that any fool could crack with a can-opener. But he's got something better for his own goods. A hard job, then. But suppose that the doors of that safe swung open, there would be the soul of Mr. Fisher to take out and handle the way we please. You follow me, old son?"

"I follow you fine. You mean to crack that safe, Tom?"

"I mean to crack that safe. Would you want to be in?"

"They've tried the safe three times," remarked Pleasant. "The first time, three of the yeggs were shot and two of 'em died. The second time the whole gang was rounded up, betrayed by somebody that sold the information to old man Fisher. The third time, they got into the office and there they had to fight, not to get into the safe but to get out of the room; and that time two more dead men were left. Well, Tom, you've thought that all over?"

"I've thought it all over," replied Tom Rizdal. "The old man figures that luck is on his side, and he puts everything he's got into that safe. All his convertible bonds, his cash, his family jewels, and everything that's worth stealing is lodged in that safe; in the meantime, the rest of the profession keep away from the place because they figure the way you do—that the place is poison. Well, maybe it is, but if you're willing to work, we'll make the try."

"You've got a crew of experts," observed big Jim Pleasant. "What real use could I be to you?"

"Because," replied the other, "for this job we got to have somebody with no more nerves than a chunk of stone; somebody as steady as a mountain, that'll live every day with the danger of being pinched and shoved into jail. You understand?"

Pleasant shook his head.

And at that, Tom Rizdal took from his pocket a small notebook and a pencil and he drew upon it, rapidly, with an artist's rough surety, a very good facsimile of the front of Fisher's Bank.

"Where's the solar-plexus of that building?" asked he.

"This is a new line of work for me," admitted Pleasant.

"You tell me, Tom."

"What's under the bank itself?"

"Why, the old Jew made that row of stores in what used to be the basement. What of that?"

"A lot! Wait a minute and we'll get to it. Three stores, ain't there? That corner one is where the janitor hangs out and sells stationery and odds and ends, isn't it? Here's the watch-maker's and jeweler's place in the center, and down here at this end is the plumber's place and hardware supplies."

"That's right."

"Well, old son, that center store, d'you see? That's right under the office of Fisher—his private office, where he has his safe!"

Pleasant sat up straight, but still his fascinated gaze held upon the evolutions of the restless revolver.

"The lease of the jeweler in that shop runs out in three months—no, it's four months, now. I'll put every card on the table and let you see what I have in my mind. Then you can decide. You throw in with me, or you don't. I want a safe man to appear and rent that middle shop, you understand? I want him to keep the place open and appear to run an honest business for a few weeks. Then I want to get into his place and start making a cut up through the floor of the bank and into the office of the president where old Fisher sits every day. Mind you, it'll be damnable work. That floor of the bank is thicker than the wall of a safe, and it's damned near as hard to cut through. It'll mean days of steady work. And every minute we'll have to be sure that the night watchman isn't on the job, and that the people aren't in the janitor's stationery shop, or in the plumber's place next door. And all the while that that work goes on, from day to day, the gent who runs the shop has to be on the job and keeping up a safe front. You understand? His nerves will have to be like steel!

"Well, I know a few men who can do that sort of work in a way, but what are they? Thugs and yeggs, and when we had a passage cut through the floor, those birds would be apt to go through by themselves, make the clean-up, and then make their getaway. You see how it is? What I need to have is a man who can be trusted, and you're the man, Jim!"

Pleasant listened, amazed.

"I know you have some sort of meaning," he declared, "but what it is beats me. I'm known in that town, Tom. How the devil could I open up a store there? Sam Lee would nearly die laughing at the idea!"

"You're known, eh?" said the smuggler. "How well are you known?"

"Why, damn well! Not a man or a woman or a child, hardly, that don't know my face. I ain't been living in a hole or dodging the daylight."

"You lived there?"

"No. Always out of town on the farm."

"You got many friends in Fisher Falls?"

"Been too busy to have friends, Rizdal. What of that?"

"It means a lot. People know you. They have a flash of you going by. That's big Jim Pleasant, the horseman, the gunman. Sure, they know your face. What else do they know about you? Nothing, I'll put a bet!"

Pleasant considered.

"But how get by the face?" he asked.

"It ain't so hard. Not half. Two months would grow a beard and mustaches; and you get weak eyes and have to wear big horn-rimmed spectacles."

"My voice, Tom. They'd spot that."

"I don't think so. A mother or a brother or an old pal would spot it, maybe. But not folks that have seen you, but hardly talked to you. They couldn't do it! Besides, in four months you could change your lingo. You've had schooling, Jim."

"High school. That's all."

"That's enough. You talk rough and free and easy not because you have to, but because you've got careless. You concentrate for four months, talking the King's English as

if you were a king. You'll begin to change. Right? And speaking a new lingo, who'd spot you with glasses, a beard, and the rest? Who'll be dropping in to finger-print you? And there's something else worth talking about. People see and hear not what's actually in front of 'em but what they expect to see and hear. Suppose that they see you in the store. What they think of Jim Pleasant is of a big gent roaming around somewhere in the open, dodging the law and doing it damn successfully. They think of you with a gun in your hand and a mask on your face, most likely. And there you'll be in Fisher Falls right under the old bank, and getting ready to cash in. They won't have any imagination to fit into a thing like that. Ask yourself, and you'll see that I'm right!"

"Perhaps," murmured the other. "But how the devil could I run a store? What do I know about stores?"

"You know guns, saddles, ropes, everything that goes to a horse or a cowpuncher's outfit, don't you?"

"I know something about those things."

"You know 'em backward, their prices, the best makes, everything. You know rifles and shotguns. You know everything that powder and lead can be fitted into. Why, man, the thing for you to do is to open a gun-shop here in Fisher Falls. For that matter, you ought to make money at it. The thing's never been tried!"

The eyes of Pleasant began to glint, still following the evolutions of the uneasy revolver in the fingers of the master criminal.

"And selling things," he objected. "I never did that."

"You can learn. After a couple of months of hair-raising, you can travel back East and get into a real gun-store as a clerk. I've got a lead that would plant you in a shop, I

think. Spend two months there, raising more hair, studying your lingo, learning the system. When you come back, you'll be a first-rate gun salesman. Now, what do you think of the dodge, Pleasant?"

"It makes me sweat," admitted Pleasant Jim, honestly. And he mopped his forehead.

"The hard jobs," replied the philosopher, "are always a damned sight harder in the distance than they are when you're close up to 'em. Those mountains, you look at 'em, and they seem like a solid wall, but you and me know a hundred half-blind trails that run through them. Think it over."

"I'll let you know to-morrow."

"No, let me know in five minutes. To-morrow I'm due a hundred miles from here. And I'll tell you this to help you think. We've got our party for the job here at hand. There's Charlie. You know him. There's me. And besides that, there's Lefty for the fine work on the combination, and Joe Christy to blow the safe, perhaps. Lefty and Joe are strangers in the town. They could work with you in your shop. That's five men. Well, we'd give you two shares on the loot. One-third, old timer, of everything that we take out of the soul of Lewis Fisher."

"I'm kind of shaky about the idea," replied Jim Pleasant.

"You think you are, but you ain't. Try your gun on that rock that I tried to hit a while back, and you'll see how shaky you really are."

Instinctively, Pleasant obeyed. The heavy Colt glided from beneath his loose coat into his hand, and exploded instantly, hip high. The rock jumped into pieces, squarely smitten in the center.

"I told you so!" grinned Long Tom Rizdal.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. FISHER was a man who believed that there are few acts in this life of ours when time and thought will not surpass accident and swiftness of decision. Therefore he never was in haste. The center store beneath the bank was vacant and had been vacant for a week with no claimants of the quarters because most of the storekeepers in the town were rather contemptuous of what they termed "cellar stores." However, Mr. Fisher was in no haste to rent according to the proposal which had been committed to paper and lay in a letter upon his desk.

It said simply:

"Dear sir,

"We understand that your bank is located in the central portion of Fisher Falls, and that beneath it there is quarters for a small store. We contemplate opening a gun-shop in Fisher Falls, and we are prepared to offer you thirty dollars a week for the location of which we speak. We understand that it is shortly to be vacant. Will you kindly let us know at an early date if this proposal interests you?

"Yours very truly,

"WILLIAM J. FOXHALL,

"for Greendale, Chase, and Foxhall, Ltd."

The letter was interesting, and the rent offered was some twenty or twenty-five per cent greater than Mr. Fisher had expected to receive; on the other hand, he was not altogether pleased with the idea of a gun-shop beneath the bank. Would

there be a shooting gallery attached? Of course that would make the thing impossible, but at any rate it would mean a constant gathering of the idle and the curious cowpunchers who passed through the town and that, he was sure, would detract from the dignity of the bank. That bank, you must understand, was something more than a spaciouly arranged piling of stone and brick and mortar; it possessed for Lewis Fisher a soul of mystery and strength. Sometimes he even thought it was his own unfleshed spirit which was housed there, and always he grew increasingly uncertain as to where the boundaries of his self ended and the boundaries of the bank began. So other men worked for immortality by striving to throw themselves into pictures or poetry, but he committed his personality to the bank; and a very great poet it would have to be who should outlive the bank of Fisher Falls. Just as his name must exist forever in this town which he had made; even when the stone statue of him should molder in the park; just so the bank must go on and on. Its fleshly form would change, no doubt. It would advance, at last, to the solemn dignity of a Grecian façade, with Doric columns of white marble, tenderly fluted; and not in vain would it have the temple's appearance, for it would be housing a changeless spirit—his own soul! Sometimes he felt an overwhelming wave of self-pity when he thought how utterly he surrendered himself and lived for his bank, for what he performed was done in its name instead of in his own. Reports went out from directors—shadows which he maintained!—and policies were decided by the same board, so that he was concealed in the institution which he had built. But on the other hand, he received from the bank a delicious companionship. He had endowed it so richly with spirit that it had a soul with which it looked back at him; moreover

it had other uses and if at times strong and cruel things had to be done, they were not done for Lewis Fisher but for the bank.

Therefore it will be understood why the president considered the letter on his desk for a long time, and every day for a week he glanced at it again, and pondered. It might be a blow to the dignity of the bank; on the other hand, the rent offered was excellent. Compared with the gross bulk of his millions, such trifling sums were negligible, but Mr. Fisher had ever in mind the flowing of a mighty river which is composed of a myriad runlets. So he would have the bank to be—recruited constantly by the trickling of little streams of currency.

He wrote back, at last, asking if they would allow him to see their representative; they replied that a trusted subordinate, Mr. Struthers Holman, who in fact had been selected to open the store in Fisher Falls, would call upon Mr. Fisher in a few days.

Then Mr. Holman called.

Mr. Fisher liked him at once, for he was a tall, solemn, quiet man who wore a short, sharply pointed beard, and closely trimmed mustaches. When he sat down, he looked steadily at Mr. Fisher through great horn-rimmed spectacles.

“Are you,” said Fisher, when the other’s business had been stated, “are you really qualified to work in the shop with guns?”

He would have guessed, rather, the profession of medicine or of law; there was just a touch of the funereal about this tall fellow. However, Struthers Holman assured the banker that he was in fact qualified to sell guns and other furnishings for cowpunchers. He made a gesture as he spoke, and the banker took note of hands which were long, and covered

with sinew and all the signs of great strength. He decided on the spot that he would give the lease. But, first of all, he mentioned his possible objections. He hoped that violent advertisements would not bring crowds to the place; he hoped that the new store manager would have a due regard for the dignity of the environment in which he found himself. Mr. Struthers Holman was the height of consideration. He assured Fisher that Greendale, Chase, and Foxhall, Ltd., never pursued a radical policy. That they carried only the best of guns and the best of ammunition, together with knives, some saddles, and other matters which might be able to please the eye of the Westerner; and Greendale, Chase, and Foxhall, Ltd., really despised violent and acrobatic advertising. They preferred to go steadily and slowly and build up a reputation by letting customers see that their goods were of the best and that they stood behind their goods.

Mr. Fisher was satisfied. He shook hands with Mr. Struthers Holman, and the strong, large hand of the gun merchant amazed him again. Mr. Fisher liked strong men; he was a strong man himself, but of course his strength was rather of the spirit than of the flesh, and from that moment he patronized the new store. He recommended it. He stopped in to see how it was coming on. He took an interest in the large and heavy cases which Greendale, Chase, and Foxhall consigned to their new branch. He was delighted when, behind glass cases, the glimmering shotguns and rifles were displayed in dark and terrible beauty. Whenever he stepped in, the tall and stately Holman was sure to wait upon him with a deferential courtesy. Holman had good manners of a rather clerkish pattern, and above all he knew how to use the little word "sir." It makes such a difference!

"I hope you are going to like Fisher Falls," said Mr. Fisher at length. "Because you are the sort of person we want out here. We want strong men, because we're a strong community. There's a place for you here, Holman, even if you have to write with your left hand."

He laughed at his little jest, and Mr. Holman smiled gravely at this allusion to his infirmity. An accident had happened to his right wrist in a fall and he had lost that delicate control of the fingers which is necessary for the movement of a pen. For that reason, he had had to learn to write with his left hand—a labored matter, and a most scrawling, scratchy signature!

"You are making a good thing of this place," said Mr. Fisher. "But as a matter of fact, you have one weakness. Let an older man tell you what it is."

"You are really kind," said Mr. Holman earnestly. "What is it, sir?"

"You don't know people, Holman! That's your fault. You know guns; you know your business; but you don't know people! Now, you've employed that stodgy, beetle-browed, square-jawed fellow as one clerk, and that thin, pale, absent-minded chap as another. In the third place, you've hired that simple-minded girl who used to do the drudgery at the jail. The creature's a half-wit, Holman. I can read the human eye; trust me when I say it!"

Holman made a deprecatory gesture.

"As for the two clerks—I don't need them. I could get along without them and save a great deal of money, sir. But the firm sent them out to give them experience in a new field. They expect to open other stores through the West. So I have to keep them. As for the girl—what you say is very true, but

then you see, she's cheap, and she's too simple-minded to steal!"

"Ah?" said Fisher. "There's sense in that. I always keep my mind open to reason, and I see that you have thought the thing out. And yet there are few people in the world so simple that they may be trusted. Believe me!"

"I do," said Holman with a strange earnestness. "I do, with all my heart, sir!"

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Mr. Fisher left the gun-store, two clerks who had been apparently busy at the gun racks, and a pale-faced drudge who had seemed to be scrubbing in a distant corner, turned to Struthers Holman.

"And now what does the old sap have to say?" asked Joe Christy.

"He just has pointed out," said Struthers Holman, "that you look like a beetle-browed, square-jawed crook, and that Lefty seems to be an absent-minded idiot. He thinks that I ought to fire you and get a new layout. I pointed out that the firm hired you, and it's not my fault."

"He's got your interests at heart," said Joe Christy with a sour grin. "I got a personal interest in trimming the old four-flusher."

"At least," said the girl, "he didn't pick on me."

"Didn't he?" answered Pleasant. "All he said of you was that no one was simple-minded enough to be trusted."

"There's more blood in a turnip than in the brain of that old boy," said the girl. "I'm dead for a smoke, Pleasant. Do I get it?"

"Get out of sight, then," said Pleasant. "Come back here where the crates are."

They sat down in the rear corner of the shop and she lighted a cigarette, sitting cross-legged on a box-head and leaning back against the wall.

"You're tired," suggested Pleasant.

"Tired of my game; tired of my face; tired of everything," said she.

"Suppose that the deal goes through," said he, "what will you do with your split?"

"Me? Oh, I'll pull out and take my share back East. I'll settle down in the village and build mother a new house and make her happy. And maybe I'll marry, Jim. A girl wants to marry and have children. But, oh, how I long for quiet!"

"Go back now!" he exclaimed. "Go back and pull out of this mess now, Sally. You're too good for it. And you've done enough already to deserve your share. I'll personally see to it that you get the coin."

"Will you?" said Sally. "Good old Jim!"

She laid a hand on his arm and smiled at him with such a childish trust and gentleness that suddenly he stood up and walked away to conceal his emotions.

Mr. Joe Christy examined him with a critical eye as he strode past; watched him with attention as he fumbled blindly at a rifle in a rack; and then turned towards Lefty. With deliberation and solemnity Lefty winked.

Christy, however, seemed much excited, and hastily he went and stood before the girl.

He pointed a stubby finger at her, and his face worked with anger.

"You promised the Chief," said he, "and you've busted your word!"

"I don't know what you mean, Christy," said the girl with coldness.

"Aw, hell, Sally," said the yegg, "don't come that over me. You know what I mean. You been making a fool of the Big Boy again."

"What business is it of yours?" asked she with a sudden savagery. "Let me alone. Do you hear?"

"You're heated up about it, too," said he judiciously. "All heated up and mean about it. But what surprises me is that you, who always was considered a square-shooter and a fair one, should take it into your head to play a low game on the Big Boy! What chance has he got against you?"

"Am I poisoning his soup?" she asked fiercely.

"You're knocking him cock-eyed," declared the yegg with conviction. "You never miss a chance to hand him a mealy smile or get a calf-look into your eyes. One of these days you'll shake your make-up so that you can hit him harder!"

She smiled faintly, a satisfied smile, and Joe Christy became angrier still.

"I know you like a book," said he, "and every thought in your crooked head. If you can crumble him up in this make-up, what'll you do when you get a chance at him dolled up in something slick, with a gown from old Paree and some fake pearls around your neck? But I'm gunna spoil your little game, kid. I'm gunna blow to the Chief and let him know the entire lay-out!"

She smiled again, and leisurely blew a long puff of smoke towards the ceiling. The anger of Christy was increased.

"Him too!" said Christy. "You got him twisted around your finger, too!"

He added, with inspiration: "Suppose that I go to Pleasant Jim and let him know the facts about you?"

"Go on," said the girl, unperturbed.

"Suppose I tell him," said the yegg, "that you never been straight, that you started picking pockets when you could walk, and that you passed on to bigger work in the line of

bunco steering and smuggling jewels, and finally you graduated right up to the class of Long Tom. I know the line you pull—a little mother waiting for you in a little cottage in a little town back in Connecticut with a little rose vine climbin' over the front door—ah, hell, Sally, I know all about you!”

“All right,” said the girl, “you go ahead and tell him all that!”

“You ain’t afraid even of that?”

“No, but you are. He’d have a gun on you, Christy, before you got halfway through that little recitation, and you know it, friend!”

She picked up a string, and with marvelously dexterous fingers began to tie it in runic knots.

Joe Christy began to perspire. Finally, changing his tone, he said: “Why d’you do it, Sally? You been a square shooter. Why d’you pick on poor Pleasant?”

“I got to have my fun, dearie,” answered the girl. “It’s a dull life, and it don’t last very long. Besides,” she added with some heat, “who’s Jim Pleasant?”

“I’ll tell you if you don’t know. He’s hell on wheels,” replied the yegg, “and if you get him into a tangle, he’s gunna bust through and smash things generally when the pinch comes. He ain’t a crook at all, Sally, and you know it. But before you get through with him, you’ll make him as bad as they come!” He glared at her and then added: “As you’ve made crooks of plenty before him!”

“You love him, don’t you? you bull-faced toad!” said Sally amiably. “You love him so you could hardly live without him! And yet it’s you, you sap, that’s taking him down the line, you and the rest of you! Who started it? Me?

No, but I'm having a bit of fun with a real man, such as comes inside of my eye once in a lifetime. The rest is spent with common yeggs, and dead-beats, and saps, and crooks and long-riding roughs like you! Go tell him that, too! No, I'll beat you to it and tell him what you've told me!"

She slipped from the box and started for the door, but as she moved towards the main store, Joe Christy caught her by the wrists and called to her softly: "Don't you do it, Sally. Don't you, for the love of God, girl. If you start on me, you'll make him kill me; and I never could stand in front of him. No more could I with even Lefty to help me out. You'll have the murdering of me, Sally. What pleasure'll that be to you?"

Sally desisted, white and very angry.

"All right," she said. "Then you unclamp my hands, will you? And leave me be, Joe. I do no harm to you, and you do no harm to me. And so far as the Big Boy goes, how d'you know that I wouldn't make as good a wife for him as the next one?"

"Wife?" said the yegg, blinking at her. "Wife? My God, Sally, have a heart, will you?"

Sally endured this outbreak as well as she could, and then glared most evilly at Joe as he retreated to the store-room. But it was plain that neither of them had uttered all that was within them.

Joe Christy had no sooner gotten inside the other room than he gasped and dodged backward.

"Who's held a gun on you now?" asked the girl sharply.

"There's the mean little runt in there!" breathed the yegg.

"There's Sam Lee, the marshal, and I'd rather look at a

rattler than look at him! He's talking with the Big Boy!"

"Sam Lee!" breathed the girl. "Sam Lee! What's he doing here?"

And seizing a polishing cloth and giving herself one glance in a little pocket mirror, she sallied out.

CHAPTER XVI

EVEN in the midst of his home town, even in Fisher Falls itself, where the mantle of his position as Federal Marshal made him a person to be pointed out and wondered at, Sam Lee never abandoned his rôle of humility. Some people were prone to say that it was a false rôle, but others declared that what he acted was, in truth, what he most truly was. The heart of a lion had been combined with the soul of a mouse, and therefore when Sam Lee came into the gun-shop, he came in a hesitating, gentle, almost a deprecatory manner, as one who has no right to enter such an establishment.

As big Jim Pleasant saw the man of the law enter, he changed color a little, and he said to Lefty: "Go handle that fellow, Lefty! It's Sam Lee! I don't want to talk to him!"

Lefty did not so much as stir an eye, but he calmly advanced upon the little marshal, and soon he was deep in the explanation of an automatic, picked from the newest show case. The marshal was full of exclamations, but presently, he called upon Jim Pleasant, from the rear of the shop. His attitude was that of a man so filled with wonder that he cannot rest until he has a somewhat larger audience.

"Now, sir," said he to Pleasant, as the latter unwillingly came forward, "I'd like to have you tell me: why shouldn't everybody in the world that wants to use a gun have an automatic? Why should there be such a thing as the poor old single-action Colt? Can you tell me, sir?"

Pleasant was warmed by the thought in spite of himself.

He picked up the gun—with his left hand. Always, he made sure that whatever he did was with the left hand, for that was a vital part of his disguise. It made it possible, for instance, for him to do his signing of letters in the broad, scrawling script which surely never could be recognized as the handwriting of Jim Pleasant, refugee and breaker of jail.

"Well, sir," he said, "for a person who doesn't want fine shooting, I suppose that you couldn't beat an automatic. If you had a wife to leave at home, and some danger that she might have trouble, an automatic would be just the thing. When she takes up this gun and pulls the trigger, she squirts a stream of lead like water coming out of a hose. And any roughneck or burglar who's tagged by a drop of the water from *this* nozzle, is pretty sure to drop and stay down. Or if he can run, he's likely to begin running and keep on."

"You don't say!" murmured the marshal. "Can you handle this gun?"

"A little, sir."

"There's a range right down the street," said the marshal with a sort of boyish eagerness. "Would you mind coming down and showing me what it can do?"

So Jim Pleasant was forced much against his will to accompany the other; Lefty found an excuse for joining—in order to carry an extra case of guns and ammunition. And they went out past the little drudge, Sally, who had begun to polish slowly the door-glass of the store.

On the way, the marshal chatted in his semi-childish manner.

"You've been at this work for a long time, I suppose?" said he.

"What makes you think so?" asked Pleasant Jim, who was giving away nothing in this conversation, having learned the marshal's tactics long before.

"You got the professional air," said the marshal with admiration. "Now this other young man, here, this pale fellow, he knows his work. But he ain't got the same sort of a professional manner that you have. How long have you been at it, might I ask?"

"Three years," said Pleasant Jim.

"Only three years? Well, well! And here's the range. Suppose that we just step in here!"

They went into the little shop. A slatternly middle-aged woman ran the place; in the background, a red ball bobbed upon a steady stream of water, and against the steel-plated wall a procession of stately little white ducks constantly appeared and disappeared.

The woman offered them a rifle, throwing back the safety lock with a click, and with a familiar grin at the marshal.

"Not the rifles," said the marshal, nodding to her. "We've brought along some new-fangled guns, Mrs. Holstein. Now, let me see what that automatic can do, Mr. Holman."

Pleasant Jim took up the automatic.

It was a long-barreled, big-caliber type, and he directed it at the red ball. A shower of seven shots answered his pull on the trigger. The fountain was cut by three of the impacts, but the ball still floated.

"Well, well!" murmured the admiring marshal. "If that had been a man, he would be about cut in two, I reckon. What's wrong with the gun, Mr. Holman? I'd rather have it than a dozen of the old single-action Colts like this one!"

And he brought into his hand a long Colt and tapped it familiarly.

"Everybody to his own taste," answered Pleasant. "But the single-action gun has its points."

"What are they, then?"

"It shoots harder, and it shoots straighter."

"Ay, but even a single-action gun wouldn't be hitting that little red ball, hopping on top of the fountain, yonder."

"Wouldn't it?" said Pleasant Jim, setting his teeth as he squinted at the mark.

"No, sir," said the marshal. "Not even a gent like you, that's made it his profession—for three years, did you say?"

"Yes," said Pleasant Jim. "But I think that the red ball could be hit."

"Here's a gun," said the marshal. "Don't let that hold you back. And here's five dollars that says it can't be done—say, in three shots."

A faint smile touched the bearded lips of Pleasant.

"Give me the Colt," said he. And taking it, he half-closed his eyes and balanced the weapon daintily in his hand. The balance was true, and the fit was perfect; never had he wielded a kinder gun.

"Here's my five," said Pleasant Jim, fastening his glance upon the target. "I'll have a couple of shots first, to see that the old gun shoots straight. Watch the ducks, if you please."

And tilting the weapon from the hip, he fired twice, not using the trigger, but raising the hammer with his thumb and letting it fall with sufficient force to detonate the caps. Two ducks in succession fell miserably over upon their sides!

"It's a good gun and a true one," admitted Pleasant Jim. "And if I can't hit the ball with this, I can't hit it at all!"

"Neat work," said the marshal. "And from the hip! Turn on the other two fountains, Mrs. Holstein. There you

are. There you are. Three targets, at five dollars a throw, if you can hit them! After all, a sliding duck ain't a bouncing ball! It's ten times the size, and it only moves straight!"

"We'll see," answered Pleasant Jim. "I couldn't hit the ball with an automatic. The first shot you throw is usually more to get the range than anything else in fine shooting. But the first shot of an automatic begins to throw the gun out of line. You might hit a man; you might cut a man in two. But again, you would miss a rabbit as it cut across the trail. Here goes! Now, Mr. Colt, stand by me!"

And laughing a little, he raised the gun, extended it to arm's length, and dropping it on the target he hit the water-column just below the ball.

He turned the weapon on the second little fountain; the red ball was knocked from sight; and from the third fountain the third shot blew the target.

"Hai!" cried Mrs. Holstein. "Who's shot like that in here since Jim Pleasant's day? Two out of three and with a revolver!"

"Wonderful!" said the marshal. "And left-handed, Mrs. Holstein! And a man who's handled guns only three years!"

"Aw, say," grinned that lady, "does he hand out that lingo? Quit the kidding, Mr. Holman, and admit that you was born with a gun in your hand!"

"Not at all," broke in the marshal. "Not at all! You take a fellow like that, with the right nerves and the patience, and he can teach himself pretty near anything inside of three years. Well, sir, I admire how you done it. Here's the other five, and I never was gladder to spend ten bucks in my life. When I ask for a posse the next time," he added, smiling, "I'm gunna call on you special, Holman. And—I'll stick

to the single-action Colt, thanks! No new-fangled ideas for an old-fangled man!"

So big Jim Pleasant got back to the store, and there he found waiting for him the anxious face of Long Tom, himself. He hurried and shook the hand of Pleasant.

"I thought you were gone, Jim," said he. "I thought that that damned marshal must have marched you away to the jail, and if you got inside of it the second time, I knew that we'd have our hands full to get you out."

Pleasant was extraordinarily cheerful.

"The old marshal ain't a bad sort," said he. "He came in asking about automatics. Well, I think I could have sold him one, but I couldn't advise even him to take what I figure is a bad steer. I told him to stick by the single-action Colt. And he asked me to come down the street and show him what the automatic could do at Mrs. Holstein's place."

"And you went?" exclaimed the leader.

"What else could I do?"

"Go on!" said the other, hoarsely.

"I couldn't hit the red ball on the fountain with the automatic. But I got two out of three with a single-action gun that the marshal handed me. And, Tom, I got ten dollars of his money along with 'em!"

Long Tom Rizdal bent his brows as though he had received a stroke of mortal danger.

"If you got ten dollars of his money," said he with a sudden decision, "he'll have ten years of your life!"

"You think that he's suspecting something?" asked the big man.

"Why should he be here asking for automatics when he's damned those guns every day of his life?" asked Long Tom Rizdal. "He wanted an excuse to get inside the shop—and

he's had his look around. He's had his look at you! God Almighty, Pleasant, I thought this bank was as good as in our hands, but I begin to think that we're going to miss the richest haul that ever was inside of my fingers!"

In time of doubt, Jim Pleasant liked to be alone, and in time of danger he preferred his own meditations. Now he withdrew from the shop and into the pasture lot which lay at the rear of the place.

Long Tom remained behind to ask further questions of his lieutenants, and when he had gleaned from them every scruple of information which was to be had, he went with Joe Christy to find Pleasant again.

From the rear door of the shop they looked out on the pasture, and there was Mr. Pleasant seated upon the top rail of the pasture lot fence, and beside him sat the slender figure of Sally.

It was as innocent a tableau as one could wish to see, but at that moment the girl tilted her head and smiled up at Pleasant and he, bending a little over her, smiled back.

At this, Long Tom tapped the shoulder of Christy sharply. "How long has that been going on?" he asked.

"I thought you'd spot it," said Christy, "but I'm here to tell you that it started on the first day and that it's been going on ever since! How does it look, Chief?"

"Like trouble," said the latter instantly. "My God, like what a lot of trouble it looks to me, and with a capital T."

CHAPTER XVII

WHATEVER the concerns of Long Tom in the affairs of the girl and of Pleasant Jim, he was too much bent upon the work at hand to be greatly troubled by extrinsic matters. That Saturday night had been set for the date of cutting through the ceiling of the shop and so gaining admittance to the office of the bank president above them.

So, when that time came, Long Tom, the girl, Pleasant, Christy, and Lefty the yegg were gathered in the store silently. Behind the drawn curtains of the front windows, and the front door, they had hung heavy blankets, not only to make it impossible for light from within the store to reach the street but also to muffle any sounds of hammering which might be made within the shop. At the outer door was posted Sally, because her ears, as was said in the gang, were a trifle sharper than the ears of a cat. Jim Pleasant himself, as the strongest man in the crew, was to begin the cutting, to be relieved later by Long Tom, and then the others in turn.

They had to wait for a long time. The janitor sat at the door of his adjoining shop with his wife and it was well after ten before he and his better half retired to find their sleeping quarters. Then the cutting began, but when the deep plaster was removed from the ceiling and the slats above it cut through, they discovered that there remained a massive slab of cement and stone rubble to be pierced, and while they had plenty of tools for piercing wood or steel, they had nothing with which to attack such a barrier as this.

It was too late for them to secure what they wanted, and for that reason they decided to postpone the venture until the following evening.

They gathered once more at the appointed moment, Long Tom never leaving the store, for he did not dare to venture away from the shop by night or day for fear of being recognized, since it was not the first time that he had operated in the vicinity of Fisher Falls and the price on his head now had mounted to the considerable sum of fifteen thousand dollars; a figure at which it was impossible for him to bribe men to hold their tongues. That is, unless he spent a fortune on each man.

They met in the store that evening determined to do or to die, for that same day an event had happened which frightened them all thoroughly and made them see that their time was short. Just before noon, it happened that Pleasant Jim had left the store and the marshal entered immediately afterwards, and asked for the manager.

It was Lefty who met him and gave the information that "Holman" was out. "But maybe I can wait on you, Marshal Lee," said he.

"Maybe you could," answered Sam Lee with his cheerful smile, "but that Holman, he's got a way about him that I like, and from the shooting that I seen him do, I'd rather hear what he's got to say about guns. I ain't quite satisfied. I want to give the automatics another trial! Well, I'll drop in again!"

"Do," said Lefty.

At the door, the marshal turned again.

"When'll Holman be back?"

Lefty took wise thought before he answered.

"He's gone for a jaunt into the country, and he might not be back till Monday morning."

The marshal had raised his brows a trifle at this, and that trifle had been enough to make the heart of the yegg jump.

"Very well," said the marshal, "I'll try to see him when he comes back. He's a wise young man," he added. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!"

And he went off, chuckling a little at his own remark, as though he had some secret reason for his mirth.

That secret reason was something which the rest of the gang could help Lefty to decipher. The suspicions of the marshal doubtless had fastened upon this man who had handled guns for three years only, and who yet was a dead shot even with the left hand. For that reason they determined to act at once. By Monday morning the place might be in the hands of the marshal!

Their suspicions received adequate confirmation the same day, for it was observed that a new tenant had rented a long-vacant flat just across the street, and the man who had taken the new rooms seemed to spend most of his time at the window, smoking a pipe and looking down at the vacant street—or across at the comings and goings through the door of the gunsmith's place.

They did not recognize the face as belonging to some man in the employ of the marshal; they did not have to shoot so close to the mark, for more than common sense was not needed to perceive that this man was a common spy. And it meant that their time was very short, indeed!

That night once more the janitor sat late in the door of his shop, chatting with his wife and with one of the two night watchmen, who paced up and down the block, meeting regularly at the bank corner to converse for a moment and

then go off, twirling their sticks; but finally Sally gave word that the janitor and his wife had gone into their rooms, and the time to commence the work had come. Pleasant, striking hard and fast, bit rapidly into the strong, rocky concrete, and the thick flakes which he dislodged showered down upon the padding with which they previously had covered the floor. In this manner he soon was up to the flooring, which proved to be a double layer of hardwood and made difficult sawing, particularly since Long Tom insisted that the work should be done with such care that the carpet of the office should not be injured.

The planking, in turn, was cut through, and they climbed up, into the private office of President Lewis Fisher. When they were inside, it seemed as though every passer-by on the street could look straight in upon them, for the broad plate-glass windows were stretched all around the bank, showing the naked outlines of the safes, and there was a street lamp at the corner which cast a wide, glimmering light.

The two night watchmen, approaching at that moment, seemed on the very verge of walking into the place, and the gang slipped to the floor and waited, breathless.

For long hours, so it seemed, the two watchmen maintained their conversation; then they sauntered slowly off, each casting glances which seemed to probe the dark bowels of the bank. Now Sally hurried to the door, and turning from that point, she squinted towards the safe, after which she came back to them: "Stand up and start work, Lefty," she said. "Everything seems bright looking out at the light, but looking in at the darkness even from the door one can't spot a thing. From outside the glass even an eagle couldn't see you!"

So said Sally, and Lefty obediently and willingly stood up.

They dared not show a light, but he had a cigar going, and by the dim red illumination of its lighted end, he read the combination and fell on his knees beside the safe to listen.

No one stirred, no one whispered. It seemed to Jim Pleasant almost an amusing thing that this absent-minded dreamer, this stumbling, awkward, clumsy, useless bungler, should in the crisis be the cutting edge of the whole of Long Tom's machine. So not a breath was drawn, and a full quarter of an hour slipped away.

Then Lefty stood up and stretched.

"He's beaten!" said Long Tom fiercely, and through his teeth. "He's beaten, and the whole plant fails! No, by God! Christy, I'm going to blow the damned safe, and then we'll take our chances on getting what we can."

"We'd get jail, and that's all," declared Joe Christy calmly. "Are you done for, Lefty?"

In return, Lefty answered briefly, "Tell me the numbers. I can hear the tumblers fall, now. But one of you has squeaking shoes, and I wish that you'd stop shifting around on them. It drowns out everything!"

The others turned their head in the semi-darkness and smiled. To their less delicate ears, there had not been a single apparent sound.

Lefty now dropped to his knees again, and Joe Christy leaned beside him. From time to time, Lefty stopped, and when he stopped, Christy whispered the number which was indicated. Long Tom, dropping on one knee, wrote the quoted numbers on a broad pad he had taken from his pocket.

So the work went on; the silence grew more intense, and finally the soft whispers of Joe Christy seemed as loud as the shouting of a legion to the watchers with their wildly beating hearts.

Lefty paused again, and again stood up and stretched himself.

"Lefty?" gasped Long Tom, his usual stoical calm completely gone.

"I dunno," said Lefty in a very weary voice. "If I ain't got it now, I'll never get it. Now, Tom, come here and we'll check back that last set of numbers and see what happens!"

So Long Tom, reading the numbers by cigar-light, quoted them to his man, and Lefty worked the combination. There was a little click, and the wide door of the safe sagged open and fell slowly back. The ghost of light which fell from the street lamp of the corner touched upon the rows of boxes with which the inside of the big vault was lined, and where almost the total negotiable wealth of the banker was lodged.

They had a brighter light than this by which to look the situation in the face, for as the door of the safe reached its full width, there was another little click, and a broad electric light was shining down upon them, making the entire inside of the bank brilliant, and seeming to pour radiance out on to the street.

One gasp, one groan came from every throat, but Pleasant Jim acted as he groaned. He leaped for the steel fence of the cashier's cage, and sprang up to the second row of the bars. There he was able to reach the light that poured down bright ruin over their heads, and with a blow of his hand he quenched it; a little tinkling shower of glass fell back upon the floor, and after that the terrible, waiting silence began.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER the broadness of that light, it seemed most certain that the whole city must see and guess what was happening inside the bank. Lefty, his nerves quite gone, slipped down the hole into the shop below; and his teeth chattered audibly as he went.

He was in a blue funk, and would be good for little during the rest of that night when so much must still be done!

The rest, however, seemed steady enough; and now the two night watchmen came towards the corner, and it seemed like a blessing that they came without undue haste, swinging their clubs as calmly as ever. . . . And yet that might be a cunning ruse, to pacify the criminals inside the bank, while sufficient forces to ensure their capture were brought together and pooled near by.

At the corner, as usual, the pair paused a moment in conversation, and then turning from the pavement, they pressed their faces at the same moment against the glass and peered inside. Their loud voices could be heard faintly, like far-off sounds in a mist.

"Can you see it?"

"Sure, I can see it."

"It's all right?"

"Sure, it is."

"I kind of thought that I saw something."

"You think too much. That's what comes of a high school education!"

And the two passed off, each on his separate beat.

Inside the bank there was a general stir, so terrible was the relief. And yet all danger was not gone, as the swift and eager voice of Long Tom assured the others at once. They had to make quick time, for the flare of light which had escaped the attention of the two night watchmen might well have attracted the attention of others—above all, of that steadfast spy who observed matters from the building across the street from the bank. However, the light had not shone two seconds before the fist of Pleasant shattered it to bits, and there was a strong possibility that no one had marked its glare.

Now Joe Christy and Long Tom fell to work on the boxes within the safe. With wedges, with heavy hammers, with “can-openers” they struggled. Sally, from the door, peering down either side of the building through the big windows, gave warning by a lifting of her hand which told them when to stop all effort. And the signal was relayed by a whisper from Pleasant Jim.

The strength of that safe was in its walls of steel, and not in the individual boxes which it contained, for the banker had felt that it would be a needless expense to install units made of expensive tool-proof steel. They gave readily under the skillful handling of the two workers, and into a broad bit of canvas, which had been prepared, all the loot was dumped.

Every one of the boxes was opened; the safe doors were closed again and locked; the trifling débris was gathered up with care, and down through the hole in the floor they went, pushing the carpet back into place above the gap. Beneath, they had arranged a prop with a board on top so that no one stepping on the place where the hole had been cut would have any idea that robbers had come that way.

Pleasant Jim, by this time, was in a panic; he proposed that they start for their horses at once, in the spot at the edge of the town where Charlie Rizdal was to have the animals ready. Loot could be divided later on.

But Long Tom was adamant. He seemed to enjoy prolonging the suspense and, lighting a cigar, he sat down over the pile to sort it.

"Nobody has spotted us," he declared, "or they would have been at us long before this. Nobody is going to spot us, either, because we've covered up our traces. It will be about Monday at ten, when they open that safe, that they'll see what's happened, and after that it may be a time before they think to examine the floor of the office. This has been a neat job, boys, and neat jobs don't fall through. Before they start on our trail, we'll be more than twenty-four hours away, and with a start like that, who'll ever throw a scare into us? We've got to divide the stuff now, because if we don't, it will be too bulky and too easy to fall into the hands of some lucky guesser."

Swiftly they began the work, but it was not too easily performed. All manner of odds and ends had been emptied from the drawers of the vault. There were old accounts, and ledgers, and even files of letters which that careful man of business had locked up beyond the reach of fire or of theft.

"There's stuff here," commented Long Tom, "that would make old Fisher yell if it were to be published. But blackmail isn't my line!"

It was a fixed business principle of Lewis Fisher's that ruined him now. The power of hard cash was what he worshiped, and his sense of power had only been fed by the knowledge that in the safe at the corner of his office there was a store of wealth which could be converted almost in-

stantly into money. Money itself could not lie idle without sinful waste; but readily convertible securities were the same as cash and also they worked for the owner. He had broad holdings of real estate in the valley, as a matter of course, but the cream of them already had been sold and turned into his favorite form of investment, and in addition to that vault and its contents he had little indeed except his proprietary interest in the bank.

The wealth of Lewis Fisher, therefore, lay heaped upon that broad canvas strip, and the workers, busy and silent, checked the loot into even piles, eight in number. Three shares went to Long Tom, one for his brother, who had done much outside work in this affair, and two for the chief who had planned the work; there was a share apiece for Sally, for Joe Christy, and for Lefty; two shares also were reserved, according to promise, for Pleasant Jim.

The sum total was the magnificent amount of eight hundred and sixty-four thousand dollars; to Pleasant Jim, two hundred and sixteen thousand of the bulk was handed, and he stuffed it into a broad money-belt which he had provided for the occasion. It made a fat layer about his body, and he was smiling down at it when two sharp blows were struck at the front door of the gun-shop.

Two terrible heart shocks were those strokes in the middle of the night. Who could be there?

Lefty, turning deathly pale, whirled to run for the rear exit, but Long Tom caught him with a hand of iron.

"You fool," he whispered, "they're giving us the scare from in front, but you can lay to it that they've spread the strongest net behind the shop. Out the front way, all of us. Pleasant, go beside me. It's Sam Lee. I'll swear to that! The rest of you come swarming behind. Soft foot it, now!"

Those directions he whispered swiftly, and added: "No shooting! Club your guns unless it's life or death. Then run straight down the street and double to the right down the narrow lane. Pleasant!"

With the last word, he glided towards the door, Jim Pleasant beside him. The heavy valance of the blankets which had shut all light into the store now acted to muffle the sound of their footsteps. Scarcely breathing, they stood behind the door just as two more thunderous knocks were leveled against it. A window screeched open, and the voice of the janitor called loudly: "Hey, you! What do you want down there? Don't you know the shop's closed, this hour of the night?"

There was no answer from the street; Long Tom, with stealthy, cautious fingers, turned the key noiselessly in the lock and jerked the door suddenly open. At his side, Pleasant sprang through, his revolver raised, and he saw before him three men, grouped close together. Weapons glimmered in their hands; they were armed to the teeth, but doubtless they had felt, as Long Tom Rizdal guessed, that their summons would drive the herd through the rear entrance where they would be amply dealt with. One gun was fired; but it was merely a nervous contraction of a finger that sent a bullet into the pavement. Then Rizdal and Pleasant reached them, with Christy behind, and Lefty snarling like a furious panther. Down went the three as though a bolt from heaven had struck them, and while two lay crumpled and silent, stunned by the blows they had received, the third writhed blindly as the fugitives rushed on and began to scream in a dreadful voice:

"Help! Murder! Help! Help!"

That voice tore through the night, like light through dark-

ness, and with each piercing syllable, a red pang of fear shot across the brain of Jim Pleasant.

He had fallen back towards the rear and now he half turned, his gun poised; but the girl, at whose side he had placed himself, tore at his arm.

"You fool! Do you want to hang?" she gasped.

And he went on beside her.

The others had drawn somewhat ahead, but not far. She ran like a deer, smoothly, with a springing stride, and so beside her, Pleasant dodged into the dark mouth of the alley.

A far Western town sleeps lightly; its nerves are too finely strung for heavy slumber; and a shot, a screaming voice, and then the heavy bawling of the frightened janitor from the window were enough to rouse more sluggish minds than theirs. Windows now began to be slammed up, and heads appeared, and beneath every head there was a gun.

Some had a glimpse of the fugitives; the others were told by the roaring voice of the janitor; and so trouble began to muster on the trail of the robbers, as wasps swarm forth to take vengeance upon an intruder.

Noise began to sweep over all of Fisher Falls; men shouted; dogs barked or howled wildly. But Long Tom, in the thick heart of the alley's darkness, halted his band. They stood close together, breathing hard.

"What's to do?" asked Lefty, the most nervous of them all. "What's the plan, Chief?"

And the big man struck terror to every soul by saying swiftly: "We're cut off from Charlie and the horses; they're clear on the other edge of the town. Boys, God knows what we can do. I haven't a plan!"

CHAPTER XIX

NEVER before had the Chief appeared so great to Jim Pleasant as on this occasion when he frankly confessed that his mind was at a loss and he himself in the utmost confusion. Silence held the rest, and Long Tom went on: "Whatever we do, we have to start for it soon. I say, let's go ahead for the railroad. The straightest way out of town would be along the ties; and perhaps when Charlie hears the noise, he may guess that we've gone on foot that way, and he'll come around to bring the horses to us along the track."

After despair, the faintest gleam of hope seemed bright and strong to them, and they followed willingly as the tall leader went on towards the railroad line, no longer running, but keeping a brisk walk. As for Jim Pleasant, he was in the rear, still, with the girl, and she panted as they went: "Now, don't you be a big sap, Jim. If the pinch comes, let me go. I could take care of myself. That's the agreement always when we're running for it. Every man for himself!"

Pleasant Jim looked down at her. He said nothing. And his silence spoke to her more than words. She wasted no more breath in protests, but as though realizing that he was beyond her influence, she kept on doggedly behind the others, breaking into a trot, now and again, to make up for lost distance. And Pleasant noticed that there was no hysteria of fear or of weakness in her. Alert, light-footed, she kept on her way with her head as high and her eye as keen as though they were out for a pleasure stroll.

They reached the little railroad yard and got into the shadow of some heaps of ties as a small cavalcade of horsemen swept out of the body of the town and poured along the road towards the station. They were reading the minds of the fugitives, no doubt, and guessing that they might head towards the iron trail. All the town, now, was waking; lights gleamed from nearly every window, and a gathering murmur showed that Fisher Falls was rousing to its work. Five hundred mounted men, and every man a good shot, might be sweeping over the countryside in the search, before long.

And then, from a neighboring yard, they heard the piping voice of a child saying: "That way! Towards the railroad yard! They went that way!"

Crouched in the shadow of a pile of ties, the hunted looked back and saw three men with rifles or shotguns in their hands pause at the edge of the nearest fence. Hesitating there, they seemed calling to the rear for help before they undertook the dangerous search.

In that pause Lefty's nerve forsook him so far that he insisted on thrusting his share of the loot under the pile of ties which covered them with its shadow.

"Down the track a little, in that shed," said Long Tom softly to his group, "is the hand-car. We haven't horses, but on the downgrade we ought to make that car walk along faster than a horse could run!"

So saying, he gave them a new touch of life. They had felt the dangerous hand of the law reaching around them, and they raced, now, to break from the circle before it should be complete. Now that it was a matter of length of legs and power of stroke, Jim Pleasant and Long Tom pushed ahead, side by side, leaving the others well behind, and Pleasant was

far ahead when he reached the hand-car shanty and whirled around its corner into the sight of two negroes playing a sedulous game of craps by the aid of a railroad lantern.

"You Jack and Joe!" commanded Pleasant harshly. "Tumble into the shed and help us roll out that car!"

Whatever fear they felt, the stimulus of the naked revolver made them act. Pleasant had a glimpse of the rolling whites of their eyes, and they rushed feverishly into the shed with him as Long Tom came up. The doors were thrown open, and the ponderous car started moving—ah, with what sullen difficulty!—out towards the track. Here were six men, however, straining their muscles, and quickly the big truck was put aboard the rails, and the party swarmed aboard it while Long Tom tossed a handful of silver to the pair of negroes. They picked the coins out of the air and then put their shoulders to the hand-car and gave it a flying start.

Hardly flying enough, indeed, for straight down the track came a mob of a dozen, bristling with guns, and gaining the fair view of the hand-car with the huddle of humanity aboard it, one of them called out loudly for the fugitives to surrender and the rest dropped on their knees to fire. What easier target could they have wanted than this, with the straightness of the rails to guide their bullets home!

But Jim Pleasant, with careful gun, sent two bullets whistling about their ears. It would have been easy to drive every shot home, but his wide experience taught him that the sound of a bullet often will do more than the impact; the martial knot of heroes on the track melted away with yells of anger and fear; some random bullets they fired as they scattered, but not a soul on the moving car was touched. Now the pumping handles were beginning to pick up the

speed; the hand-car shot out of view around the long, easy curve.

"Drop the car off the rails and take to the woods as soon as we're safely clear of the town," snorted Joe Christy, as he worked his turn. "They'll surely telephone to the Lower Falls and cut us off there!"

"We may beat the telephone message—God knows!" said Long Tom. "But we have a ten times better chance if we get into the bigger country that lies beyond. Will you risk the Falls at this game, boys?"

They did not answer, except to pump at the handles more swiftly, until the hand-car was fairly reeling with speed. The grade was distinctly down; the power of their impetus sometimes threatened to jerk the handles from their grip, and a gale of wind was raised by their rate of progress.

On the front of the hand-car sat Sally. She kicked her feet and laughed as contentedly as a child on the back fence eating a piece of pie to the confusion of the neighbors. And in the meantime, despite the torrent of wind that poured into her face, she took down the masses of her hair, hitherto pinioned at the back of her head, and did it deftly into a great, luxurious knot at the nape of her neck. And with her handkerchief she scrubbed the red from her nose.

The moon rose untimely and showed the world an altogether altered Sally; and big Pleasant Jim had sight of her as he stepped to join the crew at the handles while the car approached the scattered hovels of the Lower Falls.

As they came, it seemed to them that they could see the fireflies of danger lighted before them, sparks gleaming from the windows of the cabins.

"Faster, for God's sake!" said Long Tom, and they began to saw up and down with all their might, until their arms

went numb from wrist to shoulder and shooting pains settled in the small of the back.

Some one was running with a lantern, swinging it violently as he approached the track.

"Suppose that they've blocked the track!" cried Lefty the nervous. "We'll all be killed!"

"Suppose there is fire in hell!" answered Pleasant Jim. "We'll all have to wind up there some day!"

And fiercely they increased their speed and took the curve before the station, rocking with the violence of their impetus. The moon was well up, by this time, and under its light they saw men coming, some on horseback and some on foot, and three or four, in the lead, just scrambling up the bank.

"Drive 'em back or we're done!" said Long Tom.

And Pleasant Jim straightened his aching back, and stood against the wind with a gun in either hand. He was frightened. He was wonderfully and terribly frightened; but his brain was as clear as stars on a very cold winter night. He placed his shots with the nicest skill. He raked the ground with the first pair so that the cinders the bullets raised must have been dashed into the faces of those who were climbing the bank. Several fell back, shouting with fear, and only two men gained the upper level and ran on towards the track. Each was carrying a small timber and their purpose was plain. So much as a pebble placed on the rails would probably knock over the hand-car; and Pleasant Jim fired with a different purpose.

"Kill them!" thundered Long Tom. "Kill them, or we're done, Pleasant."

Something other than death was in the mind of Pleasant; and the words of the marshal drifted back through his mind. Sometimes, surely, it was valuable to be able to shoot so

well that murder was not necessary in order to stop a man.

Just below the hips of the other man he drew his bead. It was not easy to fire from the rocking, rushing hand-car, thrust forward by the irregular motion of the handles, but after all, it was very much like firing from the back of a galloping horse—only easier!

He fired—the man ran on and raised his timber to throw it on the tracks. He fired again, and man and timber fell in a heap. The companion lost all interest in the work he had undertaken, and dropping his piece, turned and fled wildly for safety beyond the bank.

A bullet singing near his ears gave him wings; and making a final leap he tripped and tumbled headlong to safety, while the hand-car shot past the danger point and the shriek of the wounded man ran up the scale into their ears and died down again as they shot on like a hurricane.

A scattering of rifle shots rang behind them, but then they drove on past the side of a line of freight cars back on to the siding, and so they had shelter until another curve of the tracks whipped them from the sight of the Lower Falls station.

Vague noises of guns and of human voices beat in the night behind them, but they were hurtling on towards freedom, or at least towards a better chance of escape than had seemed possible since the moment the two knocks came on the door of the gun-shop.

CHAPTER XX

THEY rested from their work for a moment. The strong arms of Pleasant and Long Tom kept the hand-car rattling on at a good gait, but no longer was there the rushing wind of their speed about their ears, and the trees and telegraph poles beside the track no more were leaping wildly past them. Smoothly the wheels clicked along the rails, sweetly and easily it took the curves, for still the long down-grade favored them and its own weight was enough to keep the car rolling.

They discussed the best probabilities, then, and among the rest, whether it would not be wisest to ditch the car at once and take to their heels across country. For doubtless it would be expected that they would keep on the rails for many a mile, and all pursuit would tend headlong to a considerable point past this.

Long Tom, however, advised that they continue up the railroad as far as conveniently possible, for the tracks leaned well to the north, now, and soon would edge along the tall mountains in the heart of which, scattered here and there, he knew where they could find good and trusty friends, and horses to carry them on their way.

But even Long Tom was a little uncertain. In all the deeds of daring which he had committed the horse had been his means of approach and his means of escape, except for a few occasions when the blind baggage of a speeding express train had snatched him away from the reaching arms of the law. Cast now upon the resources of foot and hand power, he was a little bewildered, and although it was the coolness

and surety of his advice which had carried them safely to this point, it was plain that he lacked any great self-confidence. That lack was reflected, now, in the spirit of criticism which was beginning to arise among his companions. And Lefty was the leader of the semi-revolt.

The nerves of Lefty were always of the hair-trigger variety. Good for a flash of fight, or a moment of heroism, his strength of body and mind was like the strength of a hunting cat. He could scheme patiently enough; he could spend his days and his weeks of planning, studying, preparing for a great adventure; and like a cat, he could strike brilliantly, swiftly, decisively. But afterwards he could not sustain his morale.

The force gave way; he began to disintegrate. A leopard can catch an antelope in a hundred yards and give the deer an ample handicap; but the antelope could beat the leopard over twice that distance, and fairly laugh if the course were a quarter of a mile. So it was with Lefty. The shocks and the strains of the robbery had worn him out; he was conscious, too, that in an early moment of stress he had abandoned his share of the loot, and a driving rain, or the removal of the pile of ties might snatch his fortune from him. Therefore, with only bitterness of spirit to sustain him, and with only gloom in his heart, Lefty's powers of mind and thought rapidly were giving way.

He curled up on the hand-car, blinking at the trees as they sailed by him, and shuddering now and again, as though the cold thought of past danger came home to him, or the dread of danger to come overwhelmed him.

He insisted, now, in an incisive, whining voice, that they should take the car from the rails at once and take to the woods.

Long Tom was the height of patience.

"And why, Lefty?" he asked gently. "What's the vital danger that we're in?"

"There could be a blockade of the rails," said Lefty eagerly. "They could wreck us as easily as I break this splinter!"

"How could they get word ahead?"

"Good God, man, by telephone or telegraph, of course! Ain't they done it before?"

"There's no station nearer than Wetherby."

"Something could happen—something could happen!" insisted the querulous Lefty. "They might catch us up from behind!"

"Can horses run as fast as this hand-car?" said the calm chief. "I mean, on this downgrade?"

There was an interruption from another source.

"They got iron horses on this trail," said Joe Christy sullenly. "You might as well think about that, Chief! Suppose that they get an engine out after us?"

"There was no engine in the yards at Fisher Falls!"

"Ay, but there might be one up or down the line!"

"There might be green cheese in the moon," said the cheerful leader.

"I tell you, you're closin' your eyes!" shouted Lefty, his nerves mastering him in a leap.

"Steady! Steady!" said Long Tom, but even as he spoke of steadiness his own impatience mastered him.

So he added in passion: "We need one head and one master in this business, and I suppose that that's my place. Lefty, keep still till I ask for advice, will you? They're not going to be able to chase us with an engine; and so we'll

be able to run on the tracks close to the edge of the mountain."

Lefty was crushed to silence by this exhibition of authority, but now as the hand-car reached a long shoot where the rails were very smooth and straight and where the wheels made no sound other than a soft clicking, the fugitives heard a dull rumbling far behind them, then a blink of light like the glance of a great eye coming up from behind.

"What's that, if you know it all?" shouted Lefty, pointing in a frenzy of fear and excitement. "If that ain't an engine coming, I'm a fool and a sap!"

They should have brought the car instantly to a stop and heaved it from the rails so that they could get into the woods without being noticed, but Long Tom was too angry and stubborn to give the order at once and they remained under way, though with diminishing speed, until with a roaring and crashing and a singing like great strings under a resined bow, the pursuit engine came in full view around the next bend. It rocked with speed, and above it blew a cloud of steam through which the moonlight shone and made it whiter than any image of Parian marble from the Cyclades.

Now that the danger was so near, the crew of the hand-car fell to work instantly, stopped it, and heaved it from the track; it rolled down the bank, crashing among the brush, and the engine went by at the same moment that the gang took shelter in the shadows. The screaming brakes halted the big machine a short distance away, and Pleasant, lingering a little behind the others, saw streams of armed men descend. They seemed to have been packed in every inch of standing room on the engine and its capacious tender, and two-score fighting men were now running back to take up

the hunt. Then he strode on in the direction of the sounds of crackling brush, far ahead.

Nothing could have been more foolish than to proceed so noisily, and it troubled Pleasant. Ordinarily these people were crafty enough, and that they should simply dash away like so many wild bulls amazed him. Apparently Long Tom's authority had received a fatal blow, for the time being.

He caught up with them as they struggled up an ascent, the girl not much in the rear of the others, but as he came striding by her he called after the men ahead: "Here's Sally pegging out. Are you going to let her go?"

"Every man for himself!" snarled Lefty, who was next in front of them. "And even if they caught her, she'd wheedle her way out of their fingers! Sally, if you have any sense, you give me your share to keep for you!"

Sally, breathing hard, said nothing, but worked steadily ahead, and Pleasant kept on beside her, beating back the brush to let her get through the thickets; sometimes he stalked ahead and broke trail for her. And so she managed to keep up with the weakest of the party.

They got to the top of the ascent, and found themselves on a low hill from whose bare head they could look about over the moon-misted woodland. Behind them the line of noise had spread out wide and thin as the hunters beat the forest for their game. The fugitives had flung themselves down on their backs to catch a fresh breath, and Pleasant kneeled beside the girl.

"Leave me alone, Jim," she gasped at him. "You'll throw yourself away. Take my slice of the coin and keep it for me. That's the best thing you can do. I haven't the strength to keep ahead of them!"

He said quietly: "You and I'll hide and let the rest go on, and afterwards we'll slip back to the engine; it can't be very heavily guarded. I'll get the drop on the engineer and make him take us on down the line. Would you have the nerve for that?"

Nerve for it? She sat up with gleaming eyes, her fatigue forgotten, but to mock them and beat down their hopes, at that moment they could hear the heavy, rhythmic puffs of the engine as it got up speed down the track, hurtling on, no doubt, to reach the next town and bring back a fresh supply of head-hunters.

The flight began again; but it was a little easier, now, for the ground sloped away before them, and the girl managed to keep up.

Dawn was beginning; the moon was turning dim; from white and black, the woods were turning to a dull gray when Long Tom called his band about him. Scouting well ahead he had found what promised to be a refuge to a certain degree.

On a sharp upslope behind a dense wall of brush, he had found the wide, shallow mouth of a cave. It was a damp, gloomy looking hole; only in the center could it be entered, but here they went in one by one and worked to either side. There was barely room for them to rest here in the dark and the damp.

Day was coming, and with it the searchers pushed across the woods. They beat through the very thicket which lay in front of the cave, and finally some one dropped on his knees and peered into the shadows. He could have stretched out his hand and touched the motionless figures within; but he got up without a word and went on!

CHAPTER XXI

"He's gone for help to bag us!" said Lefty, even his whisper a sadly shaken sound. "He's gone on for help. Let's crawl out and make a fight of it—"

Long Tom did not argue, but he reached across and clamped his hand over the mouth of the safe-cracker.

So they lay in silence, a sick, long silence, waiting for the return of the spy with plenty of guns to back him up. But the other did not come back! The shadows through which those on the inside looked easily enough, had been too thick for that searcher to pierce.

The morning sun was high, now; it was a bright, hot day, and they could hear the oaths and stampings of the searchers, still beating wearily back and forth. Then a new terror came to the quiet fugitives, for feet trampled on the ground above their little cave, and a considerable amount of dirt and gravel fell on their backs; it seemed for a moment that they must risk burial alive or else crawl out and surrender, but no more fell, and presently they could hear, distinctly, the voices of two men in conversation; and one of them was the singular voice of Federal Marshal Sam Lee.

His companion was of the opinion that the whole group of fugitives had pressed straight on for the mountains; and in that direction he would throw forward the search-parties. But Sam Lee pointed out that already messages had been telegraphed and telephoned to all near-by towns in the mountains, so that a swarm of searchers surely must be out by this time to block all escape in that direction. Their duty

must be to make sure that Long Tom and his gang did not manage to slip back down the valley to the railroad.

He pointed out, moreover, that the band could not have gone very far, because a woman had kept with them. He himself had seen the print of her foot near the soft bank of a rivulet not a quarter of a mile back.

"And that," said the other, "I dunno that I understand—I mean, Long Tom Rizdal keeping a woman along like this! He's in love with her, maybe!"

"He's in love with nothing," said Sam Lee. "He'd cut her throat if he thought it would really help them to get away. Lefty and Joe Christy would cut her throat, too. None of them would be bothered by her. It must be the other man—Holman, he calls himself."

"If you knew 'em all so well," said the other, complaining, "why didn't you clamp down on them before they got into the bank?"

"I only guessed; I sent for pictures and such things. I got them identified last evening. I was just a few hours too late. No, hardly more'n minutes. That's the luck of the law!"

He sighed a little. Then his voice came more loudly.

"There's a hole under this bank where a man or two could curl up!"

The hand of Lefty closed convulsively upon the arm of big Pleasant.

"Nothing in there," sang out the marshal's companion. "I got down on my knees and had a look at it, a few minutes ago."

Five hearts ceased thundering in the little cave!

"There'll be some fighting if we *do* snag them," suggested the posseman.

"Long Tom will die before he lets himself be caught," answered the marshal with perfect surety. "The other two might fire a couple of shots, but they'd rather be jailed for robbery than murder. Holman, as he calls himself—I don't know about. I think he'll be a tougher job than Long Tom himself. What'll come of old man Fisher after this?"

"He'll die of a broken heart."

"Ay, and maybe he will. Let's get on again and keep the boys busy. Mark me—the five of them are not far from this very spot!"

So truly spoke Sam Lee, and they heard him walking away with his companion through the brush.

But that was hardly the middle of that dreary day. The sun still had to reach noon and then go slowly, slowly down the western sky, but still the five dared not leave their hiding place for all day long the sound of the hunters beat up and down through the woods, and twice they heard feet falling within a few yards of their screening thicket.

Darkness began to gather once more, but not until the blackness was complete would Long Tom crawl from the cave and allow his companions to do likewise. Then they stretched and beat their numb bodies into some sense of life; and after that they gathered in a close circle to consult.

The valley was like a loose sleeve, hiding them with its woods but also trapping them. The railroad was one margin for escape, but it would be securely watched; the mountains must now be honeycombed by the searching parties; and the upper and lower ends of the valley would be plugged by the care of Marshal Sam Lee. The decision of the leader was that they should hold straight across country, no matter how difficult, and point towards the mountains, as being the wall through which they could break with the greatest

ease; but both Christy and Lefty held strongly out against this course. They dreaded almost more than the certainty of imprisonment the necessity of having to face another march through the tearing underbrush. Moreover, they were desperately hungry. None of them had tasted a morsel for thirty hours, and during that time they had performed a great deal of physical labor.

So they headed back towards the railroad, taking a slanting course in that direction down the bank of a winding creek. To Pleasant, as a matter of course, was given the most dangerous post of rear guard, where he walked with the girl, keeping a keen lookout; Long Tom went ahead to spy out danger as they might approach it and break trail; and Joe Christy and Lefty were the main body, so to speak, and a very grumbling and discontented one.

Before they had gone very far, they heard the sound of a rooster crowing, and Lefty swore at once, and with vehemence, that he would have that rooster to eat before the night was an hour older. Long Tom vainly protested, declaring that they would be bringing down unnecessary dangers upon their heads if they lingered along the way or caused extra alarms to be sent out concerning their presence. However, Joe and Lefty outvoted him again, for Pleasant would deliver no opinion. He seemed to have fallen into a dream, striding along through the night, giving heed to all the sights and noises near him, but to no human being other than the girl. So the little column diverged to the right until, in a hollow before them, they saw the glimmering lights of a farmhouse. In the direction of that house, Lefty disappeared with stealthy haste. The rest waited breathlessly. They heard a dog begin to bark violently; the barking ceased with sudden-

ness. Then a door crashed, and from an unhooded window a stream of light probed the dark; some one shouted sharp and high: "It's Lefty!" said Pleasant, and lurched forward, but the strong hand of Long Tom checked him.

"He's brought it on himself if he's snagged there!" said the Chief.

A gun exploded—not with the clang of a rifle but the roar of a shotgun, hoarse and sharp—a barking noise.

Then silence.

And out of the darkness a stealthy, hurrying form came back to them; Lefty, carrying beneath his arm a fat rooster whose head had been wrung off. And now that there was food offered, their raging appetites did the rest and there was no further criticism of Lefty immediately. They found a close cluster of trees where they risked a small fire, and in the flames the chicken, having been cut into pieces, was roasted at the end of wooden splinters. But Pleasant, having cooked his portion with care, made only a pretense of eating it, but dropped back into the shadows and wrapped the meat in paper and put it away. Another notch of his belt drawn tight would take the place of food for him, for some time to come!

Lefty, in the meantime, explained the noises which had been heard from the house. When he drew near to it, he had been rushed by a dog, but he had clubbed the brute over the head with a billet of wood, and then gone on. But when he came to the entrance to the henhouse, he had touched a wire with his foot. Instantly a shaft of light came from the house and struck the henhouse and he knew that he had walked into a trap. Hunger, however, had made him desperate. A hasty reach secured him the rooster from the

perch, and hurrying back again, he saw the farmer, shotgun in hand, come storming from the rear of the house. He tried to skulk away, unseen, but his shadow, moving against the white-painted chicken house, betrayed him, and the result was a two-barreled charge of shot that rattled all about him but left him luckily unhurt. The farmer waited to recharge his weapon, and before that was done Lefty was out of sight.

He was much cheered both by his exploit and by the food which he had eaten, but as he finished he said: "Now admit that I was right, Tom! Admit that, will you? Because you've been talking pretty hard to me, lately!"

There was no reply from Long Tom. They waited another quarter of an hour, but he did not come to them. This was his answer to the insubordination of his companions; he had gone off to try for escape by himself. A sudden and loud yell of hounds broke through the trees then, and Lefty and Joe Christy, thoroughly unnerved, leaped to their feet and dashed away. Sally would have followed them, but Pleasant held her back.

"They have put dogs on us!" she cried to him. "Jim, are you going to wait here to be pulled down?"

"Lefty and Joe are making trail," said Pleasant. "Maybe the dogs will take after them. At any rate, that's their business. How long could you keep ahead of a pack, Sally?"

And he drew her back into the shadow of the trees.

They were barely out of sight when half a dozen looming shadows of bloodhounds came through the trees. They circled, giving tongue loudly, near the remains of the fire; but then a cluster of men came panting up to them and cheered them on.

"It was the luck of God that quartered us in that shack!"

one of them said. "Boys, we're gunna nab the whole gang. Get on, Faithful! Follow up, Grip! Go on! Yi! Yi!"

And the pack, after milling an instant later, picked up the trail of Lefty and Christy and plunged away through the trees.

CHAPTER XXII

RAIN clouds had been piling in the sky, unnoticed by the wanderers. Now a volley crashed like musketry through the foliage, and other volleys followed, until the woodland was drowned in a roar of falling water. Even through the heaviest trees, fountains began to break, and the girl and Pleasant were drenched instantly. Thunder was beating in the south, and long arms of lightning reached hastily across the southern sky. In such a riot of noise and confusion, thought itself was difficult, and speech was almost impossible. So Pleasant put himself in front and made trail, pointing his course by the direction from which he first had spotted the storm.

The ground surface turned to slippery mud; every hole was filled with water; constantly he was plunging in, ankle or knee deep, and the going became tremendously difficult. Every moment or two he had glanced back towards the girl, but as he paused for a breathing space, now, on the verge of a rapidly running little stream, she was no longer behind him. He waited; then he shouted in a great voice, but there was no answer, except the dashing of the branches under the wind and the rain, and the groaning of boughs against one another.

He turned and floundered back down the trail a few steps.

"Sally! Sally!" he boomed.

And then seeing a dense thicket, he lurched into it and nearly stumbled over a soft form which was curled up on the ground. He picked her up.

"Sally, what's wrong?" he asked. "Are you sick?"

She put her lips close to his ear, so that she could make him hear.

"I can't keep up. I'm numb and weak with the walking, Jim. Go on and save yourself," she said. "What good will it be for both of us to land in jail?"

He took off his coat and wrung it out, then wrapped her in it, in spite of her weakly protesting hands.

"I've let men lead me to-night," he said, "that had no more sense than a pack of jackrabbits. Now I'm gunna lead you—or carry you! You wanted to dodge me. Well, you wouldn't have dodged into a jail; you'd have dodged into a grave. You couldn't live through all of this water and hell, to-night."

He waited for a few moments longer, and then he forced her to get up and go on with him to the edge of the water. There she paused.

"I can't go on, Jim!" she said. "I can't get through that and you'll—"

He picked her up, lightly, and strode into the water. Midway, his feet sank into a sort of quicksand and the water rushed up more than waist high. For a moment he stood fast, struggling, and the shrill, eager, desperate voice cried at his ear: "Let me go! I'll manage—I'll swim! You're throwing yourself away!"

He merely gathered her closer and through the drenched cloth some faint warmth of her body came to him. It gave Pleasant an odd strength; the labor which had been overwhelming an instant before now became hardly more than child's play, and he stepped on through the water to the shelving bank.

There he put her down and rested his hand against a tree.

The wind and the rain had fallen away a little, just then;

there was chiefly the wail of the storm in the upper branches, and the far-off pulse of the thunder to the south; they could speak now and be heard without shouting.

"Can you stand it a little longer?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"You're only weak, Sally? Not sick?"

"I'm strong enough."

"Gimme your word of honor that you won't try to duck away from me on the trail?"

She was silent. He caught her by both shoulders and shook her in anger.

"Damn it," cried Pleasant Jim, "you're chucking us both because I wouldn't try to win through without you! Do you hear? I'll carry you into the first house and give us both up!"

"I'll go on," said the girl in a broken voice. "I'll try to go on. Ah, God, Jim, but you're a terrible man!"

"Curse me, and it'll do you good!" he directed. "Set your teeth and damn me. It'll buck you up a lot. Now, come on!"

And he started on through the woods, still slipping and sliding, and wondering at the ease and the grace with which the girl kept beside him. Twice they forced through great thickets through which it required all his strength and skill to break a passage for her, and she kept close behind, never crying out when the branches lashed her as he was forced to release them and let them fly back. But when they came to a stretch of farm fields with the blocky outline of a dark barn and house standing in the midst, she was staggering with fatigue.

Here, perforce, must be their harborage for the night.

They found cattle on one side of the big barn, and several

horses on the other, and had she been in better condition, he would have insisted on saddling a pair of the mustangs and riding on with them towards the mountains in the north. But she was far too spent, and he made her climb up the ladder to the loft.

There, lost in the pitchy darkness, with the warmth and sweetness of the newly mowed hay, he told her to take off her clothes and throw them to him. He wrung them as dry as his powerful hands could twist and tossed them back with directions that she should put them on again and then burrow into the hay. He himself did the same, and sleep leaped in a benumbing wave upon his brain.

He dreamed of wandering through a vast and starry universe on wings, with the light of a distant goal before him, and with him Sally flying also, but her pinions flagging. He took her in his arms and flew on, but her weight was dragging them both down and down—even with the light of their goal close before them. And he heard her voice, protesting bitterly, telling him that it was better for one to be saved than both lost.

And then he wakened suddenly and found himself in the warm hayloft with the warm mid-morning sun streaming through the cracks; and leaning above him in this golden-streaked gloom was Sally!

He sat up and stared at her.

"I thought that you'd never wake up," said Sally.

"How did you do it?" asked he. "How did you manage it, Sally?"

"To wake you up? By tickling your face with this straw."

"You look as fresh as a daisy."

"I combed out the seeds and the chaff from my hair; I always keep a comb with me, and you'd better use it, Jim."

He could do nothing but wonder at her, for she was by no means the white-faced, pinched, and hollow-eyed ghost of his dream. She seemed to be blooming as he never had seen her bloom before. Sally the blank-eyed drudge was gone, and Sally the hard-headed, sharp-tongued thief was gone also. It was not all in the way she had combed her hair, knotting it gracefully at the nape of her neck. Her jacket and blouse and dress were streaked and stained and covered with a network of fine wrinkles, but still there seemed a bloom upon her. It was more than the color in her cheeks. A sort of light was breaking out from her as though her body were translucent and something of the spirit came through. A continual smile was on her lips, and yet there was no mockery about it; and her eyes were like a luminous mist as they gazed down at Pleasant Jim.

He stood up and regarded her again.

"You look changed, Sally," he declared in all honesty. "And you look wonderful, too. You look as if—you look as if—"

He paused for a word, but he found none, only adding in some confusion: "As if you'd turned into another woman! But look here," he added, "you got to have something to eat; I'm going to forage."

"There's no use," answered the girl. "There are two or three men working in the field near the house and the barn. You couldn't dare to go out. But we have a decent chance. We can saddle a couple of the horses that are still in the stalls down below us, and then we could make a break for it, through the door. The foothills aren't half a mile away."

"We'll have breakfast before we start," said he. "You'll have it, I mean." And he went on, as he drew from his coat

pocket the rather bedraggled bits of roast chicken: "It don't look good, Sally, but it'll give you strength. As for me, I got a quicker way. I just pull up my belt a couple of notches. And there I am. I'm used to it, you see."

She looked at the food in amazement; and then broke into hushed laughter.

"I might have known," said she. "This is like you! Try the other pocket, Jim!"

Astonished, he dipped into it, and brought out a parcel like his own, wrapped in a handkerchief. She, too, had saved her rations of the night before. And she had dropped them into his coat.

He handed the meat to her without a word; without a word he devoured his own share, always gloomily contemplating the golden light that sifted through the cracks in the side of the barn, with a host of sparkling motes dancing in each narrow shaft. He frowned because otherwise he felt that he should break into hysterical, foolish laughter. A sort of warm joy was dissolving his self-control and his heart leaped like a bird on the wing. Moreover, he dared not look at her, for when he saw her picking the bones with perfect daintiness and composure, and smiling at him continually with that new-born spirit, he knew that he could not trust himself or his speeches.

"We'd better be starting on," said Pleasant Jim at last. "I'll look over the ground first."

With that, he crawled to the edge of the hay and looked down. There were only four horses remaining on that side of the barn, and his eye was gladdened by the sight of saddles on the pegs behind them; no other living thing was in sight. So he and the girl climbed down the ladder, he first

and she following, and while he was still a step or two from the ground he heard a quiet voice say: "Just freeze right in that place, Mr. Holman, will you?"

He jerked his head around and saw the steady barrel of a rifle covering him!

CHAPTER XXIII

ONE may take chances with a revolver, which is a careless and sometimes a foolish weapon; but there is a sort of philosophical calm about a rifle which discourages questions and sudden starts, and brave attempts. Behind the rifle was a face like the face of a bull terrier—that is to say, there was a long, down-bending nose, and a narrow forehead which hastily hid itself in short-cropped hair, and two eyes very small and black, crowded close under the shadow of the nose. There was a thin-lipped broad mouth cut in a straight line and under this a chin which receded, without giving token of weakness. It was a face which, in a photograph, would have looked extremely simple, but the brightness and the animal intensity of the eyes, in actual life, gave it meaning. There was no touch of grayness about this man, and there was no trace of a wrinkle even around the eyes, and yet something in the ruddy, weathered skin made one understand that he must be at least fifty.

Above all, he was not the sort of man who would miss with a rifle!

He said in rather a sharp and boyish voice which had little or no excitement in it: "You put your hands over your head, Holman, and come down the ladder that way. The lady, she better stay where she is, up the ladder!"

Pleasant Jim had been in many narrow corners, and it was very nearly impossible for him to think of a predicament in which he would not be able to strike back; but here

he knew that he was helpless. He put his hands above his head and climbed down the ladder to the ground, where he faced the farmer.

From the distance a woman's voice wailed: "Jo-el-l-l! Oh, Joel! Jo-el-l-l!"

"Coming in a minute, wife," said the farmer with a grin. "I'm just hung up here a minute!"

"Joel Peet," cried the shrill voice, "where are you?"

"Be still," said the farmer softly, with a shrug of his shoulders. And he added to Pleasant: "Here's four of you caught already! If I had the robbing of a bank and got the stuff in my hand, I'd aim to make a better get-away than that!"

"Four?" echoed the girl from the ladder.

"Are you chimin' in, honey?" asked the farmer. "Four, I said. Lefty and Christy are in jail, now, at Fisher Falls, where you two will be before very long. And here's the pair of you added!"

"Hold on!" said Pleasant. "I've a bargain to make with you, Peet, if that's your name."

"Go on," said the farmer. "You have my name right. Now let's hear the bargain."

"You take me and the money that's on both of us and call it square. What good will it do you to drag a girl through the dirt and put her in a common jail?"

"I dunno," said the other, "that it makes any particular difference, except about ten thousand dollars. But I'm a kind of a close-fisted man, and ten thousand is a sum that I could use—to sort of put up some new fences and even repair the old ones, maybe!"

He grinned with a deep delight as he spoke, and added:

"No, old son, I see that you're kind of sweet on the girl, though by the sassy look of her I'd guess that she ain't sweet on nothing but herself. But I'll tell you what; neither of you is going to slip through the fingers of Joel Peet!"

"Look here, Mr. Peet," said the girl, "suppose that we make another proposition to you. You turn us in; you get twenty thousand for the job. Well, that's a pretty nice piece of money. But suppose you don't turn us in. How much money would you have then?"

"Tell me!"

"A hundred thousand, Mr. Peet. You'd be a rich man!"

"Thanks," said Peet. "That's a doggone kind suggestion, but lemme tell you something. For a gent like me, twenty thousand is enough. More'n that would be enough to make my wife put on airs. Besides, I ain't a crook, I never been one, and I ain't gunna start. Holman, how many guns you got on you?"

"If I had one," said Pleasant with apparent bitterness, "do you think that I would have held up my hands for any one man in the world?"

Mr. Peet looked into the blazing eyes of his captive and smiled broadly. There seemed something delicious, to him, in the pain which he was inflicting, and Pleasant Jim thought of the smile of the bull terrier, as it fixes its hold deeper in the throat of a victim.

"I got no doubt that you mean what you say," said he. "They say that you're the cool one that run the gun-shop right under the nose of the bank all that time, and cut through the floor. That took nerve, eh?"

Pleasant Jim said nothing.

"But," continued the farmer, "how come you to be such

a fool as to lose your guns? Doggone me if I can imagine doing that, no matter what happened!"

"I got a weakness for old things," said Pleasant. "I hate to chuck an old coat, say."

"Me too," agreed Peet. "Go on."

"And that damn gunbelt, I'd packed it ever since I was a kid. It was cracked and weak, but I thought it was my luck. And when I was hot-footing it through the woods with the marshal's men behind me, it caught on the edge of a broken branch and ripped clean away. I was twenty feet on through the brush before I could stop myself, and then I seen the head and the shoulders of a gent coming after me, and closer to my stuff than I was."

Mr. Peet groaned.

"Mean luck!" said he. "Well—here you are. And you got a second belt, I see?"

"Yes."

"What's that for?"

"Money."

"It seems pretty fat and bulging."

"There's nearly a quarter of a million in it," said Pleasant Jim, honestly enough.

"A quarter of a million!"

"A shade less, for a fact, but not much."

"Peel it off," said Mr. Peet huskily. "And you was gunna offer me a hundred thousand for a clean pair of heels, ma'am?" he grinned at the girl.

"Jo-el-l-l!" shrilled the impatient wife.

"Wait a minute, sweetie," said the farmer, with his repulsive smile.

And he added: "I ain't exactly wasting my time. Peel off that there belt, Holman! Peel it quick!"

"Friend," said Pleasant Jim, "you got no more right to that belt than—I have. You'd be robbing me as much as I robbed the bank!"

"We'll see," said the farmer. "There's a difference between us—the difference of a rifle, say, coverin' the mark and damn ready to go off any minute. Will you peel off that belt and quit your talkin'?"

"You bully and coward!" cried Sally from the ladder, swinging around and facing the farmer. "You got a helpless unarmed man and you—"

"Shut your face, will you?" said the farmer in his strange, squeaking tones. "You got some of the loot on you, too, I suppose?"

"Whether I have or not, you'll never get it."

"We'll see. That's right, stranger," he added, as Pleasant Jim obediently undid the buckles of his money belt. "Let it drop and—"

"Peet! Stick up your hands!" cried the girl suddenly.

The muzzle of the rifle jerked away from Pleasant towards the girl on the ladder, at that alarming cry; there was a bright glint of metal in her extended hand that well might have drawn a shot from him, but with a grunt he pulled his gun back to cover Pleasant Jim. And all in the smallest split part of a second.

However, in a still smaller space, the hand of Pleasant Jim had leaped up under his coat and snatched out a revolver from a spring holster beneath his arm-pit. Rifle and Colt exploded at well-nigh the same instant, but the smaller gun spat fire first. A bullet hissed at the ear of Jim Pleasant; a sting of smoke cut into his face and eyes, half blinding him, but there stood Joel Peet, his rifle fallen to the barn floor, and his bleeding right arm grasped by his left

hand. All his face was pale, except for a purple splotch in the center of either cheek.

And he said, above the trampling of the frightened horses: "Thanks, Holman. You might of aimed for the heart, just as well!"

"You're a cool devil," answered Pleasant. "Stand where you are—Sally, keep him covered!"

She had sprung down from the ladder instantly and picked up the rifle, and Pleasant Jim turned to the horses. Of the four, any amateur could have selected the better pair. They stood side by side, a roan and a bay mustang, now dancing and shaking their heads. From the pegs along the wall, he snatched the saddles and bridles; never was a pair more rapidly accoutered than this.

Footsteps, in the meantime, and anxious voices approached the barn: "Jo-ell!" screamed the woman, coming rapidly nearer.

"Tell her you're all right. Your gun went off by accident!" commanded Sally.

"Mary, you fool!" shouted Joel Peet obediently, "can't I take a shot at a rat without bringin' you running?"

"Joel, you fool!" said the better half of the farmer. "Are you wastin' rifle ammunition on game like that? You come into the house right quick. I got something for you to do. And you boys," she added, apparently to the laborers who had come running up after her, "you get back into the fields. There's nothing happened."

"I heard two shots," said one in protest.

"You heard an echo. Don't stand there arguin'. You just want a middlin' excuse for lazyin' and wastin' time!"

The footsteps retreated, and Pleasant Jim led the two

horses towards the door. There he picked up and opened the money belt.

"Here's five hundred dollars, Peet," said he. "I suppose that's the price of the pair—and the cost of healin' your arm?"

The other was silent, his eyes as keen and glittering as ever as he regarded the bulky contents which remained in the belt.

"Can you pull back the door for us?" asked Sally, as she and Pleasant mounted.

"Easy," nodded Joel Peet.

And he drew open the creaking, groaning sliding door of the barn; outside, they saw the gleam of the open country, and the glitter of the sun in the distant trees, and beyond, the brown mountains and the blue.

"Go it!" said Peet. "It's cost me a good deal to stay honest, but maybe it'll be worth the price."

And his eyes were still smiling as they went by him, and the smile was not without a tinge of honest mirth.

Straight through the doorway they cantered, their heads high, alert for any sign of danger; but the two laborers already were deep in the field, at work; and Joel Peet's wife did not so much as turn her head on her way to the farmhouse. There might be some chance of a rear attack even from the wounded Peet, however, so they pulled their galloping horses to the side and presently a shroud of trees had rolled a green cloud between them and that narrowest of escapes.

Then Pleasant drew the horses back to an easy gait. He turned to the girl, and she laughed back at him, an electric laugh of joyous excitement.

"What did you use for that bluff, Sally?"

"The comb," she answered, still laughing.

"That trick might have brought a bullet through your head," he suggested gravely.

"But it didn't. It brought us three hundred thousand, and freedom, and everything."

"Until Sam Lee gets on our trail."

"He'll never be near us again. I've forgotten him; he's behind me!"

"Sally," said he, "take it from me, he'll be bringin' himself back into your mind, one of these days!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THEY were in the hills, but still all was not ended in the way of anxiety, for as far as they knew the most difficult wall to break through might be the swarm of posses which, beyond doubt, now moved through the whole face of the mountains looking down towards Fisher Valley. And if, as they gathered from Joel Peet, the banker had offered a ten thousand dollar reward for each and every man of the posse, then it would be strange if every man in the district were not out on horseback, or slipping in small parties through the woods and up and down the creeks looking for the fugitives. And men who had in view such prospects of reward would be very hard to bribe—even old friends of the Rizdal gang might not easily maintain their alliance under such a strain as this.

In a scattered grove of scrub-oak they made a halt just before noon. The mountains now rose sheer before them and soon they would have to commit themselves to one or another of the difficult trails where often it was impossible to leave the narrow limits of the bridle path because of precipices or of broken ground.

They took stock of the ground that lay before them and Sally proved that she was worthy of high place on that occasion, for she took a peg and sketched on the ground the main features of the mountains just before them and spotted on this rough map the exact position of every friend of the outlaw. They were some twenty miles apart, scattered in a loosely connected chain through the range, and showing like

a well-established system of forwarding posts when they had been spotted down. By means of those posts, the outlaw and his men were able to plunge into the highlands and be swept away at dizzy speed from the possible pursuit of a posse. For as the outlaw passed, he gave word that pursuit was behind, and every small farmer made sure that his horses should be scattered to the most hidden corners of his range, lest they should be requisitioned for the merciless hard-riding of a posse which was not inclined to pay for wear and tear except at a most nominal rate afterwards. So the law was thwarted and crime received a helping hand partly because there was more money in that end of the business, but more largely, even, because there was sure to be a sort of happy game in the feats of the bandits, in their talk, and in their trail. Who can love the hunter so much as the hunted, whether it be beast or man?

To such a man as Sam Lee, some manner of vague knowledge about that "underground" and "overland" route must have come, and he was sure to maintain such an outlook as he was able along the way; again, he might have succeeded in outbidding Long Tom Rizdal for the services of a portion of the chain of small farmers, so that they would only pretend to welcome the long-riders, but really would betray them to their pursuers. But those chances would have to be taken. There seemed no other possible way of whisking themselves out of the reach of Sam Lee and his forces than by committing their fortunes to the "underground." Next, they had to decide in what manner they would get at the line. They could go straight ahead to one house, or travel a slightly greater distance to either side in order to strike either of two other stations. But by this time, Peet must have sent out an alarm as fast as he could send a galloping horse:

doubtless that news would be relayed towards the mountains, and the straightway ahead was very apt to be closed. They determined, therefore, to turn to the left and try to make the twenty-five-mile march to the next "station."

In the meantime, they let the ponies graze, and since it seemed impossible that any one could be within hearing distance, Pleasant went for squirrels and returned with a half dozen. The fire was a more dangerous thing to try, but he knew the system of making a blaze with little or no smoke, and soon the meat was grilling. There was no salt, but no salt was needed. There was no coffee, but water from the next brook was better than wine or coffee either.

Then they mounted, and all during their halt they had spoken not a word to one another of anything except the labor before them and the risks through which they must pass; and it seemed to Pleasant Jim that he dared not meet the eyes of this girl when he spoke to her.

They were headed for the Truman Denby farm, Denby being an old "lineman" of the Risdal forces who had turned "straight" and thereby become a more efficient helper than if he had remained in active service as a rider. Once started, they urged their mustangs on to a brisk gait, uphill and down. There were not three possible variations from the single line during the entire twenty-five miles, but the narrow trail jagged up and down through the wilderness, climbing out of the lower forests and gaining presently the shrubbery, the grass lands, and the stunted trees of the upper plateau. On the edge of the wall, they turned and looked back into the valley and far off they could see the town of Fisher Falls laid out in the distance like a map rather than an actual city; below it stretched the railroad, perfectly visible as it went through the Lower Falls, where they so nearly were

blocked in their flight, and then down to the dark shadows of the forest where they had thrown the hand-car from the rails and taken to the woods and all the perils and doubts that waited for them there. It seemed to them fairly miraculous that they had been able to get up the mountain wall without being intercepted or marked down, for they could look down on the trail itself as it looped back and forth and climbed rugged towards the height. A watcher posted at this place could have seen them far off and either waited to pick them off himself or else gone for help if he had not the courage for such single-handed work.

"And that's exactly what may have happened!" suggested Sally. "Suppose that we pull well off the trail, here, and wait in cover to see what may come!"

It appeared an excellent idea, so they turned the mustangs from the bridle path and wormed a difficult, tortuous way through the broken ground to the left. A knoll a mile away was the point of vantage towards which they aimed, and as they came to it Pleasant dropped from his horse as if he had been struck by a bullet. Sally imitated that good example without need of a word spoken. He merely pointed ahead with an eloquent gesture, and leaving her to hold the horses, he crept ahead through the rocks which fringed the head of the hill.

There he had clear view of what had first alarmed him. In a pocket beneath the crest were half a dozen men and horses who waited in the saddle of the hill and keenly watched the trail which the two had left not long before. They were so close that even their voices came clearly up to the waiter.

Sam Lee was with them! The ubiquitous marshal sat

on a rock and fanned himself with his hat while he smiled at his companions and chatted cheerfully, describing how word had come to him by telephone and then by messenger on horseback, telling what reason men had for thinking that the two fugitives had come this way. It was Mrs. Peet who had sent in the alarm, and when her husband was hastily questioned, he refused to talk. At last they had pressed him too closely and he simply answered: "All I know is that a gent came up and asked me for a couple of horses that he wanted to buy. He paid me five hundred dollars; which was more than they was worth. Then he went off. That's all I know!"

"Did five hundred dollars shoot you through the arm, Peet?" he had been asked, to which he replied that he had taken a shot at a rat—and shot himself instead. Nothing could budge him from this statement, even when it was pointed out that the bullet had gone through his forearm the reverse way. He was asked if he had seen a woman, but he said that he had not. Both of the laborers in the field, however, plainly had seen a man and a woman galloping towards the trees.

"And Joe, there," went on the marshal, "has spotted them again. As sure as the devil, boys, that fool of a Holman, as he calls himself, is trying to get free himself and take the woman with him! And if he can manage that—if he can break through and take a girl with him, why, it will make us the laughing stock of the entire country. The range will never stop hooting. And remember—in a pinch there's as big a reward for her as for him. Ten thousand apiece!"

It was a speech which, for some reason, made the blood curdle in the veins of Jim Pleasant, but he had heard

enough. He slipped back to the girl, and leading their horses, one hand always ready to stifle any snort or neigh, they worked their way through the rocks for another quarter of a mile before they ventured to take to the saddle. Then they slanted down towards the trail, reached it safely, and headed on towards the farm of Truman Denby.

CHAPTER XXV

THE way had been roundabout, the labor hard over the rough country, and the twenty-five miles were not completed until dusk was beginning to settle over the range, thick in the hollows and rosy on the heights. Then they came in sight of Truman Denby's shanty ruling a little fertile hollow where the roughest of the mountain winds never would shake it too severely, where water ran freshly near by, where the low woods tangled on the upper slope, giving him constant assurance of fuel and building material, and where, at least, he could be certain of sufficient elbow-room. He was a hard and keen man. By dint of crime, to begin with, and then through constant labor as a farmer, a trapper, a hunter, and even a little mining now and again, he was said to have built up a considerable fortune, and yet he lived on like a miser, constantly casting about him for means to recruit his substance.

Sally and Pleasant, from a little knot of trees, observed the shanty anxiously. But it was a veritable picture of peace and content, with its front door standing open, and from the sagging chimney a thin twist of smoke rose in the windless air, gradually melting against the evening sky. Truman Denby himself, stalwart of outline even in the distance, was putting in the latest hours of the day chopping wood near his shack, and the powerful blows of his ax sent out ringing reports, like the explosions of a distant rifle.

Halfway down the slope rode the two and then called and signaled. Truman Denby instantly waved back a sig-

nal for them to approach, and they raised a weary gallop from the mustangs to get to this welcome hostelry.

Denby came a few strides to meet them and welcomed them heartily enough. He lifted his hat to Sally; he gave Pleasant a strong grip of his hand.

"You busted through after all," grinned Denby. "And they all swore that you'd never have a chance."

"All who swore it?" asked Sally sharply.

"Sam Lee and his crowd. They been here. They suspect me of bein' one of the underground," said Truman Denby, grinning more broadly than ever. "Come in. Sally, you rustle the grub. You'll find plenty of it in the shelf behind the stove. I'll fix your horses."

"And what else have you for this pair?" asked Sally.

"As soon as I get the harness off this pair, I'll ride down and bring in another couple. Don't worry about that, Sally. I'll put you on horses so fast that they'll never smell the dust they raise!"

And he went off with a reassuring wave of his hand. Sally, however, wore an anxious look as she entered the house. There were bacon, cold pone, and a can of fruit jam on the shelf, together with a stock of coffee, and that made provision enough for them. Yet still she was moody as she went about the cookery. Pleasant helped her, carrying water, building up the fire, and keeping constant watch through the door and down the plateau towards the trail.

"What's wrong, Sally?" he asked at length.

She looked quickly and darkly up to him, pausing with the knife in mid-stroke through an ample loaf of pone.

"I don't like Denby's carryings on," said she.

"What's wrong? He seemed mighty cheerful."

"Sure he did. Just that!"

"Too cheerful, you mean?"

"Do you know him?"

"I only met him once at a rodeo."

"I know him like a book," said the girl. "He was one of the crowd three years ago. He's always been a gloomy devil. Devil and gloomy, and both the words are true words. And now he meets us to-day and acts like a fox when it meets a goose. What do I think? I think that he has something up his sleeve!"

She turned to watch the coffee, as it came hissing towards a boil. Big Jim Pleasant, from the doorway, stared after Denby, as the latter cantered across the table-land and disappeared through a gap between two high-backed hummocks.

"We've had our share of the bad luck," said Pleasant, "and the good luck is bound to begin breaking."

"That's what the boys say when they're bucking faro," said the girl in answer. "But I tell you, there's no mercy in cards, and there's no mercy in men. They're tigers, mostly, and this Denby is one of the worst. Did you see the way he eyed your money-belt?"

"I saw," said Pleasant. "But why not? Every dog will eye a bone even if he don't mean to try to steal it!"

"Stuff!" said Sally, who could be short enough.

And still she was gloomy with thought as they sat down at the table. Pleasant ate with some difficulty, it appeared, and suddenly she grew solicitous.

"You've lost your appetite, Jim," she exclaimed. "You ought to be a wolf, and you're not. What's wrong with you? Are you sick?"

"I am, kind of," said Pleasant, growing thoughtful in turn.

She dropped her knife with a clatter and sat up stiffly in her chair, her eyes very big.

"What's wrong?" she asked hoarsely. "Is it a touch of fever, Jim? Lemme have your wrist, and—"

He brushed her solicitations away.

"It's not that," he said. "I dunno just what's wrong. I never had anything happen to me before, like this. I've had the fever, and I've had the sick insides that you get after a bullet has bored through your innards. But never anything like this."

She waited, hushed and expectant.

"I feel weak around the heart and fluttery, sort of," said Pleasant. "My head spins, pretty easy, as though it was a sort of a top, y'understand?"

She nodded as though she dared not interrupt for fear of cutting off the remainder of his coming remarks about his condition.

Pleasant threw back his head and struck the table so that there was a jangle of tinware.

"Sally," he said, "I ain't a fool and I'm not a coward; and I've never met man, woman or child that I couldn't look square in the eyes—but here I am starin' at the ceilin' instead of facing you!"

A heavy silence fell between them. Sally had commenced to frown, piercing him with her sharp watchfulness.

"What are you driving at, Jim?" she asked at length. "What have I to do with you feelin' sick?"

"Ah," she added suddenly, "but I understand, now! You been draggin' me through so much trouble that the sight of me brings you into a sort of prison horror. Is that the way of it, Jim, old fellow?"

"Horror? No, not that. But I'll tell you, I was sitting

here watching you after you'd rolled up your sleeves and taking note of the way of your hands, and the confounded dimple in your elbows—"

He paused, and bringing down his wretched eyes from the ceiling, he looked her fairly in the face. But only for a moment. Then his glance fell to the floor.

"I'm like a four flusher that has been called in front of a gang of men," grumbled Pleasant Jim. "I'm all shakes, Sally. I couldn't hold a gun steady enough to hit the side of that wall, just now!"

Sally was silent for another moment, before she returned: "It sounds like dope, to me. But you wouldn't be fool enough to use anything like that. I'll tell you what—how long has it been since you rode up out of the valley?"

"Not many days. The trail to Black Mountain was high enough."

"It's not mountain sickness, then," said Sally. "Stomach, most likely."

"It feels sort of like something wrong with the stomach—sort of a hollowness."

"It'll pass," said Sally with wise decision. "You'll see that it'll pass away, right enough. Worry—and having to drag a girl through what you dragged me—and no food half the time—and the boys welching on you the way that they did—that's pretty near enough to make you sick!"

He shook his head, first faintly and then with surety.

"That's not it. Now that we're through the hole in the wall I wouldn't have any of the rest of 'em along with us—except the Leinster Gray, of course. I'd give a pound of blood for him!"

"We're not through the hole in the wall," the girl assured him, as they began to finish their meal. "We won't be

through till we're out of this shack with two good horses under us—and by the way, it's about time for Denby to be coming back with the pair that he promised us. He's had time to go to the farther end of his place, by this. Is there any sign of him?"

Pleasant stood at the door.

"Not a trace of him anywhere."

"It's queer," said the girl. "It's mighty queer!"

She hurried from the house, and through the dimness of the mountain evening, faintly lighted by the afterglow from the west, she stared, but there was nothing before them. Then from behind the house, they heard the snort and stamping of a horse.

They started as though a gun had been leveled on them. Then Pleasant, grim of face, a Colt balanced in either hand, slipped around the rear corner of the house. There was nothing in sight. The empty horse shed was at their right. Behind the shack was the dense tangle of small trees.

"I'm going in there," said Pleasant Jim. "Stay here and—"

"I'll go where you go," she said staunchly. And she followed straight behind him as he glided through the darkness of the woods.

Not two minutes of such work brought them to a small gap in the trees, and before them, hobbled short, and grazing on a scattering of bunch grass, they saw three tall horses, and one of them a glimmering gray which seemed to show itself by its own light. Jim Pleasant groaned with wonder and joy:

"Sally, it's the Leinster Gray!"

CHAPTER XXVI

STILL with a heavy Colt gripped in either hand, he pushed forward, for it seemed impossible that they could have found these horses waiting at such a place and at such a time unless there were waiting guns ready to open fire upon them. But it seemed that the three fine animals were not the bait of a trap. Swiftly they cut the hobbles, while Sally, quivering with excitement, interpreted.

"I knew that Denby was going crooked, and this proves it. Sam Lee got these horses from Charlie Rizdal. Perhaps Charlie's in the can now. Lee came up here and cached the horses with Denby and bought him off to his side, in case we came this way. Quick, Jim! Get 'em to the horse shed and we'll have saddles on 'em! Oh, the dog! He had to ride out to get mounts for us? He had to ride out to get the signal to Sam Lee!"

Pleasant Jim said nothing. He was too busy urging the horses through the woods and back to the shed, where they picked up their lately discarded saddles and threw them on the backs of the horses. And as they worked at the cinches and the bridles, they kept an ear open for the sound of approaching horsemen. No such noise came to them. In the thickening darkness, they led the three new mounts towards the door of the shed and as they went, they heard what they dreaded—the volleying of hoofbeats across the plateau, and then the cheerful voice of Denby ringing from the distance: "Here you are, Jim Pleasant!"

Out of the dusk they saw Denby coming, leading two rider-

less horses. No others were in sight; and Pleasant stepped out from the horse shed, leaving the girl behind to hold the three thoroughbreds in the dark of the interior.

"Over here, Denby," he called. And Denby swung from the direction of the shack towards the shed.

As he came to a halt and swung down to the ground, he continued as gayly as ever: "Here's a tough pair of brutes, Pleasant. They'll take you through safely. Where's the girl? Where's Sally?"

"Waiting inside," said Pleasant, and pushed a gun into the stomach of his host. "Keep your hands away," he added savagely. "Because I'm hankering and hungering to send you to hell, Denby, you double-crossing dog!"

He reached for the buckle of the other's belt, and drawing it, allowed the belt and its dependent guns to fall to the ground. Denby groaned as they fell.

"Are you nutty, Pleasant?" he asked. "What's wrong? What's biting you? What's happened, in God's name?"

"Sally!" called Pleasant. "Bring 'em out!"

And Sally obediently led the three fine horses from the shed. Denby saw them coming and exclaimed in amazement: "Where'd you get 'em, Pleasant? Fine lookers, too, as much as I can see of 'em!"

"You dunno where they come from," muttered Pleasant savagely. "Sam Lee didn't leave 'em with you, of course. He didn't cache 'em behind the trees, yonder, and bribe you to give him word if we came this way?"

"Pleasant," said the other, "so help me God, I—"

"Shut up!" commanded Pleasant. "I hate to even listen to your yapping. Denby, I've never killed a white man!"

There was so much hidden eloquence in this remark that Denby refrained from any attempt at speech. He obediently

mounted his horse again, and they turned towards the upper trail in haste, Sally in the rear, leading the spare horse, and Pleasant riding in front, gun in hand, beside Truman Denby.

They had not gone a quarter of a mile up the trail when Denby broke his enforced silence.

"Pleasant," he said in a rather stifled voice, "I wouldn't go on this way, if I was you."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Because I got an idea that trouble is waiting for you, pretty pronto."

"You sent 'em up the trail, did you?" suggested Pleasant.

"You didn't want the killing done in your own shack, I guess? Oh, Denby, damned if I know what keeps me from blowing you to hell! Which way'll we go, then, to be safe?"

"Back to the valley, Pleasant. And I want to tell you that—"

"We'll not go back to the valley. There's some trail ahead of us through the hills. Which is it?"

"There's only a small, rough one—a damn bad one for night-travel, Pleasant!"

"Lead us that way, and only talk when you have to!"

Truman Denby obeyed explicitly, like a man whose head is in the lion's mouth, and turning to the right, he soon brought them to an irregular cattle trail which wound up the side of a dome-shaped hill, and then on the other side turned here and there through the bad-lands beyond. At length the trail came on to a small road, along which they could travel with greater ease and security. Then Pleasant halted.

"Denby," he said, "I know the way, from here. Now tell me what reason there is why I should let you live?"

Denby was sullenly silent.

"There's no reason," declared Pleasant Jim. "I'll let

you do two things—pray if you got a prayer in you, and send some message, if you got a message to send to anybody on earth.”

“I got no praying to do,” answered Denby, “and what message should I be sending?”

“Then God have pity on you, because I’m not going to!” said Pleasant, and raised his Colt.

But Sally exclaimed: “You won’t do it, Jim! You won’t shoot him down!”

“He would have trapped us like rabbits,” declared Pleasant Jim. “He sold us, Sally!”

“But our luck’s kept with us,” said the girl earnestly. “Let him go back to his home.”

“Go back, then,” said Pleasant Jim. “But don’t stay there, because when this here is known, I won’t be the only man that’ll come gunning for you. You understand me, Denby?”

Denby said nothing, but cautiously he reined back his horse, and since no word or bullet stopped him, he turned suddenly, and dashing his spurs into his mustang, raced into the shelter of the brush and then was gone, riding like mad down the hillside. Pleasant listened vindictively, and then turned with a sigh to the girl.

“He ought to be a dead man,” said he. “But two things saved him. One was you, and one was the Leinster Gray—I was so confoundedly glad to see him again!”

To this Sally said nothing, and slowly they went up the trail; the way improved; they could manage a canter here and there, and at worst they could maintain a trot, and so they voyaged through the mountains until the moon rose at last and showed Pleasant the face of the girl.

Her lips were set tight, and though her head had not

fallen forward, he saw that she was half-dead with fatigue. He himself was weary enough, iron as he was; but the work of the last two days and particularly this long, long trail had taken toll of her strength. He dared not sympathize, for fear that sympathy might unnerve her more. And so they kept on doggedly. Twice lights gleamed before them, but they went on past the farmhouses, for these were not proved places of refuge. A third time they saw the distant glimmer of lights, and now they quickened their horses to a strong gallop. Neither spoke, but both knew that this should prove a harborage, unless Sam Lee had been able to reach the "underground" even at such a distance as this.

They were too exhausted to use caution but rode straight up to the door of the shack, and Pleasant leaned from the saddle and beat against it with the butt of a Colt. It was opened at once by a man in shirt-sleeves with a shotgun thrown into the crook of his left arm.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Who knows Long Tom Rizdal here?" asked Pleasant bluntly.

The other stepped out further into the night and peered up into the face of the rider; then a smile came on his lips.

"It's Pleasant!" he exclaimed. "And he broke through in spite of 'em! Hey, Maggie! It's Pleasant and the girl, and they've come through in spite of Sam Lee and his hired men. Step down, folks; gimme your horses; Chuck, come grab these nags, will you? And shake out some barley for them and give 'em the wheat hay. Come in here, Pleasant, and you, ma'am! Doggone me, if I ain't glad to see you both; though I never expected that you'd be able to come through!"

It was impossible to doubt his genuine nature. If he

had sold himself to the long riders of Tom Rizdal, he had sold only a portion of his nature, and the rest remained bold and bluntly free. Maggie, Herculean, red of face and hand, was none the less cheerfully excited, and all in a moment they were seated before food at a rough pine table. Slabs of ham, biscuits, and steaming black coffee made up the bill of fare, but never had they tasted a more delicious meal.

Their hosts, in the meantime, ran over with questions which they hardly allowed to be answered. They were full of the great adventure. The impossible had been achieved, and Marshal Sam Lee had received the first black mark against his name and record. With five hundred man-hunters he had been unable to capture a fugitive who was burdened with the care of a woman, and surely the heart of Sam Lee must be breaking with grief.

"He hasn't got a heart that'll break," said Pleasant. "He'll be booming up this trail as fast as hired horses can bring him. Friend, get your boy Chuck to wait at the head of the trail, yonder, where it dips over the hill, and fire two shots if strangers come riding up that way to-night, and get your wife to put this lady to bed. Sally, can you wake up?"

"Yes," said Sally.

But she did not open her eyes as she spoke. She had slumped back on the stool, resting against the wall, and her head had fallen over her shoulder.

"Take a lamp and show me the way!" said Pleasant, and raising her in his arms, a loose and unconscious weight, he carried her up the narrow stairway and into the coolness and the peace of the bedroom that waited for her.

CHAPTER XXVII

As for Pleasant himself, once stretched on a bunk in the room beneath, he slept heavily and with many a troubled dream, such as come to exhausted men; but he felt that he had broken down the last great barrier and that he was safe, now. Then a nightmare seized him, and he thought that the gray stallion had been stolen and that he saw a familiar form galloping the big horse away, and the laughter of Long Tom Rizdal came floating back to him as he vainly ran in pursuit.

He opened his eyes to find that a broad shaft of sunlight was striking in through the open doorway towards him, and in the shaft was the black silhouette of Long Tom, himself, and he was laughing indeed.

"Suppose that it had been Sam Lee that walked through that door?" said the chief. "Where would you be, Pleasant?"

"Here's a man I could trust to warn me," said Pleasant. "Or besides that, I could have trusted to sort of smell Sam Lee if he came within a mile of me! Tom, how did you break through them?"

"Partly by luck and partly by nerve," said Long Tom, "but the main thing is: Did you think I was welching by running by myself?"

"Every man for himself is the rule," said Pleasant, rather bitterly. "And I knew the country as well as you did."

"When I saw that you wouldn't leave the girl," said Long Tom, "and that Lefty and Joe were making a snarling match of it, then I knew that it was better to split up. It

stopped argument, for one thing. I headed straight for the railroad, grabbed a freight on the grade, and mixed in with a fresh gang of possemen who'd come down from Fisher Mills. They didn't recognize me in the night. I dropped off before we hit the next station and cut for the hills. And so I landed here, as you see. But if I'd had a girl on my hands—why, I couldn't have gone a mile, old man, and God knows how you managed it. They'll talk of nothing else, in these mountains, for ten years to come!"

"What happened to Charlie?"

"He was waiting with eight horses on the edge of the town, but Sam Lee, the old devil, had a patrol watching. They discovered the bunch in the trees and opened fire. Charlie's horse was shot from under him. He managed to get on another, but the rest of the band were caught. He got away with nothing but his skin, and barely that. Sam Lee appropriated the Leinster Gray for himself and got to Denby's house. Then he cached his horses in the woods back of the shack and arranged with Denby to sell you out if you or I came that way. Lee and the rest took some mustangs from Denby's place and went to block the trail. But you know that better than I do! It was a grand play that Lee made, take it all in all, but all he got was two out of six, and one-quarter of the loot."

"They caught Joe with his share on him?"

"They did, and they found Lefty's part where he'd stowed it in the pile of ties. More than two hundred thousand goes back to Fisher, after all!"

"And how does Fisher take on?"

"He went nearly mad. Got on a horse and went down the valley to find the robbers, knocked his head on a branch of a tree as he was riding past, and had to be carried back

to the town. A run started on the bank, of course, but he paid everything on the nail, and take it all in all, I think he's stronger than ever. People think that a fellow who can lose nearly a cold million without going bankrupt is a genius and a great man. And I suppose he is—but a crook, too, as you know! However, now he's campaigning for our scalps and he'll have them if money can buy us, and already he has some tidy information. Lefty broke down the minute he was caught and they got a full confession from him. He named Jim Pleasant, so Holman is now out of the picture and you can shave whenever you're ready. Now tell me about yourself. I'm hungry to hear!"

"We had a couple of tight squeezes," said Pleasant, shrugging his shoulders, "but Sally got us out of the worst of them by using a metal-backed comb as though it were a gun. That's the only reason that we managed to get this far! Hey, Charlie!"

For Charlie Rizdal had come, broadly smiling, into the room; and a moment later Sally came down the stairs, her wrinkled clothes laid aside for a gingham dress borrowed from their hostess; and though it fitted her most loosely, yet she wore it with a sort of trailing grace, set it off with a wisp of yellow wildflowers at the breast, and looked to the dazzled eyes of Pleasant Jim, on the whole, more like a queen than an ordinary woman. The Rizdals surrounded her with a cheer; and then there was breakfast; and such a joyous gayety filled the air that Pleasant Jim felt he was nearer to heaven than ever before in all his days. Certainly, he told himself, there was one angel at that table, and he grew more and more unnerved as he watched the clumsy tin coffee cup supported by her slim fingers, or all her motions, as dainty and graceful as a bird's upon the wing. He felt himself

growing dizzy; all that was around him seemed unreal; and finally he left the table and went outdoors where the cool, wide arms of the mountains received him and his thoughts. But even there was a touch of the ideal—and that was the shimmering form of the Leinster Gray, galloping across the meadow like a white cloud blown over the face of the sky. Pleasant Jim felt that he had walked into a new world.

In the meantime, the talk of the three who remained inside the shanty had turned upon Pleasant as a theme.

"You got him groggy," said Charlie Rizdal, with his broadest smile. "He's wild about you, Sally! Have a cigarette and tell us about him."

"I've cut out smoking," said Sally. "He doesn't like it, very well!"

"You can duck it, if he comes back. Besides, you're not married to him."

"Married to him?" said Long Tom with a sudden sharp lift of his voice. "Not quite, I guess!"

Sally lighted her cigarette and said nothing.

"But look here," went on Charlie, not unwilling to annoy his older and more famous brother, "you call Sally your girl and say you're going to marry her, and all that. But you let another man take the hard job of bringing her out of hell, so to speak."

"What if I did?" said the big man angrily, seeing nothing to smile at in this. "She's been caught before, hasn't she? And I've always got her out again, haven't I?"

"Three times," said Sally, in a grave, emotionless voice.

But Charlie Rizdal insisted on making his point, and insisted the more because he saw that his brother was wincing.

"You've let her be nabbed three times," he said, "and three times she's had to live in jail and eat jail food, and talk to the crooks and the thugs there! A fine life you've given her to lead!"

For a moment it appeared that Long Tom would strike his brother, for his hard fist balled; but he controlled himself with a sudden effort and turning to the girl, he laid a hand over hers.

"It would have been the spoiling of any other girl, and I know it," he declared. "But Sally's a cut above the ordinary run of 'em, I hope. Water won't hurt a duck; and trouble don't hurt Sally, she slips under it or floats over it, and tar can't stick to her. Dear old Sally!"

Sally, in reply to this eloquent praise, lifted her wide, steady eyes and looked her lover fully in the face. But she said nothing. There was never a time when Sally's tongue was not under full control.

Long Tom grew alarmed.

He said hastily and eagerly: "Does it look as if I've given you a hard row to hoe, old girl? Perhaps I have. But it was your own choice. You remember three years ago, when I found you, I said: 'We'll settle down on what I can make doing some clerk's tinhorn job, or else we can fly wide and high and try for the big stake.' You made your choice then, Sally! Is that right?"

"Have I ever complained?" asked the girl steadily.

"No, not you. You're the true little thoroughbred, the clean-bred one, old dear. But from the way Charlie has been talking, I was almost afraid."

He paused and hastily wiped his forehead. Plainly he was much excited.

"When do we start?" asked Sally suddenly.

"Whenever you're ready."

"I'll go get on a hat."

And she went hurriedly up the stairs. The two brothers looked after her, Long Tom frowning darkly.

"What in hell made you start that line of talk?" he asked.

"Because I wanted to tip you off," said Charlie. "I tell you, Pleasant Jim is mad about her, and he's done enough to make her think a good deal about him. He has a way of blinking when he looks at her, and she has a way of not looking at him at all. Well, Tom, they don't *hate* each other, I suppose, and if it's not hate, what is it?"

Long Tom Rizdal drew in his breath sharply and glared.

"I understand," he said at last, with much venom. "Of course you can smile, but you've never forgiven Pleasant for hunting you down and beating you in the fight. You can't get even with him using guns; so you're going to try to use me to square him. Confess up, Charlie! That's your game. You want to make me jealous for that reason!"

"Figure it out your own way," answered Charlie Rizdal, pushing back his chair. "But while you're waiting, Sam Lee will come up the trail and grab you."

Long Tom reached out for his brother and caught his sleeve.

He said in a low, troubled voice: "She's so out in the open and square that if she was thinking about turning me down, she'd come straight to me and tell me that she wanted Pleasant more than she wanted me!"

"Would she?" sneered Charlie. "If she loved Pleasant, would she arrange for you to cut his throat? Is that logical? Why, you talk like a sap, Tom!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE last to be ready for the trail was Pleasant Jim.

They found him busily grooming the Leinster Gray, standing back from his work, now and again, and looking at the polished body of the thoroughbred very much as an artist stands back to admire the effects of his latest brush strokes on a canvas. And by the time the others were in the saddle, he was still carefully arranging the padding blankets on the back of the big horse.

"Hurry up!" said Charlie Rizdal impatiently. "Anyway, you'll have to chuck him for a fresh pony at the end of the next march!"

But when at length he was ready to join them, he acted as though the stallion must carry him to the end of his journey, no matter how far. On sharp down-pitches he refused to risk the forelegs and shoulders of the fine fellow by going at any speed; and whereas the other three were willing to spur cruelly on the steepest up-slope, Pleasant Jim would even dismount and do the bitter grade on foot, the Leinster Gray idly comfortable with lightened saddle behind him. And yet, for all their hurry, they did not gain, for now and again came a free sweep of road neither too steep in rise or fall, and over such distances the stallion went with a stride so powerful and easy that he soon was up with the scampering horses of the others. Indeed, he would have passed them well before the day was ended had not Pleasant reined him in to keep even with the others. Particularly through chopped and broken ground, of which there was

much to pass, the Gray went like a cat until Charlie Rizdal cried in admiration: "He's got a special eye in each foot!"

But as the result of the careful manner in which he was rated through the work of the day, whereas the other three horses were hanging their heads and needed to be twice-spurred before they would lurch ahead, in the evening of the work the Gray still carried on daintily and gayly, and scarcely seemed to know that he had been employed or that he carried in the saddle a more ponderous burden than any of the others.

"How does he manage it?" grumbled Long Tom, looking rather sourly at their companion. "It looks as though he'd had the brute on a feather bed all day, instead of keeping up with us through the whole day's work!"

"I'll tell you how it is," answered the girl, who had spoken very little during the whole day's ride. "It's because he loves his horse, and love can manage miracles!"

Charlie Rizdal put in, with his ever-present, quiet malice: "That's how he was able to bring you through the lines of Sam Lee, maybe. What do you say, Sally?"

Sally said nothing, resorting to one of her frequent silences, but Long Tom was greatly irritated, and his under-hung jaw thrust out even more than usual as he replied: "You talk like an absolute ass, Charlie. You hear?"

However, the speech had sunk home, and for some time after that, he stole glances at the girl, as though he hoped to surprise in her expression, at an unguarded moment, a secret which he would have been very glad to know.

And as they went on towards the dusk of the day, urging the tired horses, he let big Jim Pleasant and Charlie take the lead, while he fell back with the girl a trifle behind them. He felt that he should have waited until another time; he

felt sure that this was no topic to be discussed in the middle of a weary march; and yet an imp of the perverse drove him on and forced him to bring out the disagreeable subject.

"Sally!" he said.

"All right," said Sally. "Now let's have it all out."

"Have what out?" he asked.

"The thing that's bothering you."

He stared at her almost angrily. It was his pride that he wore a gambler's mask and that no one could read his state of mind.

"I don't know that anything's bothering me," he declared, steering his horse with a sort of absent-minded cunning down a twisted part of the cattle trail which they were following.

"There is, though."

"Well, guess at it, then."

"It's the Big Boy," replied the girl, pointing with her quirt.

Long Tom sighed. Her calm, the smallness of her gloved hand on the butt of the whip, and the green steady eyes with which she watched him, all of these small matters joined together to disturb him. She seemed more desirable than ever—a thousand times more so.

"Go on," said Rizdal. "Let's hear some more of what you think."

"It had better come from you," she answered.

Always, since the beginning, he had reserved a sort of right to command, and he used it now, in the height of his vexation.

"Damn it, Sally, do what I tell you to!"

She turned her head, and for the thousandth time he felt in those sea-green eyes that a nature as deep and cunning as the nature of a hunting cat was taking stock of him.

"All right," she submitted at last. "I'll tell you, but it

comes awkwardly from me. You've noticed that Pleasant Jim is fond of me."

"A fool—a blind and deaf fool could guess that!" said he, fiercely. "Well, go ahead. Is that what's bothering me?"

"Partly that. Because you think, to cut a long story short, that I may be half as fond of him as he is of me."

He began to breathe hard, it angered him so thoroughly to have his mind read in this fashion.

"I don't really worry about it," said Long Tom, at length. "I know that you have too many brains to make a mistake like that. If I listen to my reason, my reason tells me that you couldn't be stupid enough to make such a blunder. You know he's a good fellow. So do I. You know in this affair, he's got sentimental, and made a hero of himself for your sake. Of course that would impress a girl. And even you, Sally, can be impressed! But in spite of all that, I don't think that you'd balance him against me and prefer him. Am I right?"

"It wouldn't be reasonable," she agreed, nodding.

"Let the color in the West go," said Rizdal roughly, "and look at me. I want to know something."

"Fire ahead."

"Has he been telling you how much he loves you?"

"No. I don't even think that he knows he cares for me."

"What you mean by that?"

"There've been more horses than girls in his life. He doesn't even recognize the symptoms of—of caring for a woman."

"I never heard of such a thing," said Rizdal, darkly suspicious.

"Neither had I," said she. "But in lots of ways, he's only a baby."

"I don't like that baby talk," said Rizdal, "concerning a fighting man like Jim Pleasant. I tell you, the killings that that man has—"

"You don't know him," she insisted. "He's simply in a tangle about me. He's like a colt with a touch of colic. He feels wrong in his stomach, so to speak. Poor Jimmy!"

"Poor hell," said Rizdal. "The man's playing a part with you!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't ask me to tell you, then," she said.

"If you were another girl," said he, "I'd say that your head could be turned by the size and the strength and the courage of that fellow; but you're yourself, the hardest-headed youngster that ever—"

"Cracked a bank," she suggested without emotion.

"Well," said he, "you know black from white, and you can see this fellow for yourself. He's done something, here, because it was shoved in his way, and he can do other things, so long as he has me to think for him, but without me, where would he be? He's fit for nothing but to run a horse-farm. Well, he's stepped over the dead-line, and he'll never run a horse-farm, and you can be sure of that! He'll never be allowed to go straight. The police would see to that, and he's made himself too famous. He has to live as a crook, then. But you have too much sense to think that he can make a success at that unless he follows the leader. Am I right?"

"I think you are," she said thoughtfully, after a pause.

"He isn't made of the same stuff that you and I are made of," went on the criminal. "He hasn't the same freedom and the strength of—"

"Conscience—or the lack of it, you might say," suggested the girl.

"I don't like that," he answered briskly.

"I'm sorry. But it's the truth. However, you're right. He's not like us. I tell you, Tom, that I saw him stand to a fighting man, with his hands over his head, and the rifle of that farmer at his breast—and yet when he had a chance to shoot, he didn't shoot to kill. The farmer knew it, too. And that's why he tried to cover our trail. But you—or I, Tom—we never would have taken such a chance! He's different. White men mean something to him."

There was a trace of bitterness in her tone that made him study her once more, but he learned nothing.

"He's new in a new game," said Rizdal. "He'll learn to shoot straight, after they've put a few murders on his shoulders—things he wasn't within a thousand miles of—as they did with me. He won't care! However, to get back to our subject, I was saying that an ordinary girl might have her head turned by such a chap as Pleasant, but you see the difference between him and me."

She answered instantly: "Yes, you could build an empire where he could hardly be more than—cowpuncher, say, to the royal herd. I understand the difference between you. You have the brains, Tom. I've always known that; every one knows it."

"You say that you know it," said he, pressing his horse a little closer. "And there was a time, Sally, three years ago, when we started this game, there was a time when you thought you cared a little about me, because you felt that one day we'd do some great things together, and be rich! Isn't that a fact?"

"Yes," said she. "That's a fact."

"But now you've changed."

"How?"

"You treat me as if I were a stranger!"

"Do you want me to hang on your neck?" she said, rather curiously than with emotion. "If I did, it would be sending you off to be killed."

"Just explain that, will you?"

"I don't have to work hard to explain it. If Pleasant Jim saw me so much as pat your hand, Tom, he'd take you to one side and kill you as sure as that sun is turned red in the west."

Long Tom swore softly.

"No man—" he began with heat.

"Tush, Tommy," said the girl, and he felt that the green of her eyes enlarged and glowed as she said it. "You know it as well as I do. You're a grand fighting man, Tom dear. You're a fearless and strong man. But you're just not like Pleasant Jim. He feeds on danger. He loves it. And if ever he had what he felt to be a fair reason for killing a man, not you and not Charlie, nor hardly you and Charlie together could stop him. You don't need to be ashamed to admit it. It's simply true, isn't it?"

Long Tom started to make a swift and bitter answer. But he checked himself, for she was not, as he himself had pointed out so many times, like other women. She was capable of judging dispassionately, keenly, accurately. And he knew that she was correct.

"Perhaps you're right," said he, his brow very dark. "But the fact is, Sally, that right now we're riding here together behind their backs, and yet your eye never softens when you look at me."

"Did I ever gush over you? Did I ever play calf?" asked the girl.

"You have a sweet way of putting it," growled Rizdal.

"You found me starved and sick and done for," said the girl in explanation. "You gave me a chance to do something—to be a sort of power—to handle men, you know, and money. Well, I loved it. I've always loved it, and the danger and the excitement, as well. I'm a crook. I'm a natural crook, and I admit it. Well, Tom, I said that I wanted to learn the game and you've been teaching me. I said that I like you. I do. I said that I would marry you some day. I suppose that I shall. But in the meantime, don't ask me to fondle you and pet you. I can't and I won't. It isn't in me."

"There's no possibility of love being in you!" exclaimed he in bitterness.

"Maybe there isn't," she answered with composure. "But if you ever find me a bad bargain, chuck me quick. I'll never blame you, you know! Only—I've got to let you know the truth!"

This straightforward reply seemed to take his breath. Actually, with one hand he gripped the pommel of his saddle and stared down the trail before him with eyes that saw nothing.

"You take what I said too hard, Sally," he replied. "I don't mean you to go after me like this. Be reasonable! God knows I'd like to have you a little softer—to me! But perhaps if you were, I wouldn't be so mad about you! It's just because you're different from the rest that I'm wild about you. You're full of differences and contrasts. The other girls, if they go wrong in one way, go wrong in all ways. But you've robbed banks—and remained as straight

as a string as a woman. Of course I want you straight and clean. And if I've got to take the hardness with it—why, I'll do it. Besides, when we have a chance to make a home, Sally, I think I'll find ways to warm your heart!"

She did not avoid his glance, but looked fairly at him, and smiled with a sort of good humored appreciation of his enthusiasm.

"And, Sally, when we settle down, it'll be a real place. No sneak's resort. The Riviera would about fit us. Something near Nice. Cannes, maybe. A swell villa in the hills. About a million servants. A yacht tipping at anchor in the harbor for us. A car as long as a snake and as strong as a train. Jewels, kid. You know. The pigeon-egg, hundred per cent red ruby and emeralds to match your eyes, honey. Why, Sally, we'll be like a queen and a king, I say!"

She listened to him. She canted her head a little to one side, and sighed as the beauty of this proposed life grew before her mind's eye.

Then his tone changed.

"But what about Pleasant?" he asked suddenly. "What are we going to do with him? What you feel about him?"

She answered without the slightest hesitation: "I can't let him down, Tom. You know that. Not after what he's done. I have to string the poor simpleton along and try to break the news to him gently. What else could I do? Tell him he ought to go back to his farm? The poor devil hasn't one any more!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THERE was no sign of the pursuit of wise Sam Lee behind them all that day, but that did not mean that the veteran had decided to throw up the trail. It simply meant that he knew he had lost his first trick, and that he was determined to win the second.

Two tricks in such a game as Tom Rizdal played might come far apart, and therefore Sam Lee determined to act as though he had half the world and all of the future years in which to win his battle with the criminal. He did not blindly persist on the trail. He had laid one excellent trap for the capture of Pleasant Jim, and when that trail failed, while the criminals feared him every instant behind them and pushed their tired horses by relays across the mountains, Sam Lee went straight back to Fisher Falls.

He could have pleaded that he lacked authority to act, now that the pursued were over the state line, for he had been acting, in this, merely as deputy, and not in his federal capacity. Counterfeiters were his quarry. But bank robbers, after all, should fall to the lot of the regular state police.

However, such a plea never for a moment entered his thoughts. He was here to enforce the law, and enforce it he would, and in all of its phases; for in many ways, a more ideal officer of the law never strapped on gun, or stepped into creaking saddle-leather. He went back to Fisher Falls to be at the center of action, to collect new clues, to discover, if he could, to what extent, if any, this had been an inside job,

to lay his plans for the future, and to gather around him a few most efficient helpers to be used on the long trail which he foresaw lay before him.

When he rode into Fisher Falls, he was received in a manner which was a novelty for him. All his days he had been the great, the rising warrior of the frontier, the faultless, unfailing destroyer of crime and criminals; but now he found men's eyes fixed coldly upon him, and he could hear their whispers and their derision behind his back.

It hurt him, of course, as it hurts all men, but it did not cause him to back water or to change his good resolutions. He never had turned his back on guns; he would not turn his back and run away from gossip. So he let them talk, listened with the ears of a fox, but showed not the slightest dismay or concern. And that took more courage and more iron nerve than anything he ever had done before.

The last man another would have wanted to face was the first one he went to interview.

He went to the bank and saw Fisher.

The banker had turned from rusty gray to white. Hair and face both were without color, but instead, his eyes were shot with red, and his nostrils flared, and a smile could not come on his lips.

"Have you come back to ask me to thank you for your work?" said the banker, rising and striding to meet his famous caller. "I say, it's the existence of fools like you, blind men, weaklings, half-wits, that encourages bank robbery! By the eternal God, you suspected them the day before the robbery—and you didn't act!"

The marshal stood under the shower of fire and did not wince.

"I did not," he confessed.

"Have you got the brazen nerve to stand there and admit such a thing to me?" roared Fisher, some of his color at last entering his face.

"I have to admit it when I make a mistake," said the little marshal.

"Mistake? Ruin! You could have done half a dozen murders and done less harm than you've allowed to come to me and my bank! The future of the valley—tied up here—advancement—progression—irrigation—better stock—new railroad—everything—all tied up in my bank—and you've let them cut the throat of my bank—you've let them bleed me dry—you've put the country back a hundred years—maybe you've ruined it! Maybe you've ruined the whole valley—maybe forever!"

There was a cub reporter of the *Evening Democrat* sitting outside the office, hoping for an interview which for two days had been denied him. And now he heard this thundering voice as every one in the bank must hear it, and as even those who passed in the street were sure to make out its flooding torrent of noise. The pad and the nervous pencil were snatched up, and he began to make notes. He saw a headline forming, in the back of his mind. He saw an article which would be copied by the biggest newspapers in the state. He felt the congratulating hand of the editor upon his shoulder. He saw fame. And he wrote shorthand like mad and crowded his brain with additional notes.

If the marshal, standing under that shower of verbal stones, saw headlines also, they were of a nature to scourge him like the fabled scorpion whips. But still he did not wince.

"I made a mistake," he repeated earnestly. "I should

have acted sooner, but I hoped to make a clean scoop and gather in more of the tribe. I should have struck in the evening, when there was a chance to block their escape, but I waited until the later night because I was sure that I had arranged a complete and perfect net—”

“Net, hell!” screamed Lewis Fisher. “The rotten trap that you put up any child could have broken through! A ridiculous, damned, idiotic fool’s affair that even a—”

“Excuse me,” drawled the marshal, setting his teeth to keep back his temper, “but as a matter of fact it wasn’t such a doggone bad idea that I had. Only I missed out on one thing. I knew that this gent Holman who has turned out to be Pleasant—I knew that he was a strong one and a dangerous man. But I didn’t know that Long Tom Rizdal would be mixed up in the affair. If I had, I’d have armed every man in town and blocked every street before I went to break open that gun-shop!”

“Second thoughts! Second thoughts!” cried Fisher. “Who can’t have good second thoughts?”

“I haven’t done so badly,” said the marshal. “At least, I’ve handed back to you a quarter of the loot—”

“Twenty-five per cent. My God, I think you’re actually proud of it!”

“I am,” said the marshal.

Mr. Fisher recoiled. He thought this quiet little man had come in to humble himself. He discovered that he was mistaken, and softness of voice did not necessarily mean weakness of spirit. It chagrined the banker that he could not bully the marshal at will, but nevertheless he felt much better because he had had a chance to blow off steam, as it were, on the subject of the wrongs which he had endured.

"I am proud of it," said Sam Lee, repeating the idea. "Even as it was, I should have caught all of them, with the possible exception of Tom Rizdal. Pleasant and the woman were in the hollow of my hand."

"Were they? Were they?" shouted the banker, growing more furious again. "Then why didn't you close your fingers and catch them? Will you tell me that?"

"Because Pleasant performed a miracle. You think he made a fool of me. No, I don't feel that way about it. He beat me, I admit, but it took wonderful work for him to get away."

"You dropped in to tell me how pleased you are with yourself, I see," said Fisher.

"No," said the marshal, "I dropped in to tell you that in spite of the failure I've made, I'm going to keep after them and I hope I'll land them. And the higher you can boost the price for their capture, by making some arrangement with the governor, the easier my work will be and the bigger your opportunity of—"

"Of getting back the rest of the money?" exclaimed Fisher.

"No," said the marshal, "probably you'll never see another penny of it, unless we should catch a couple of them and let them ransom themselves. And that's a low business."

"The regaining of half a million dollars," shouted Fisher, "is a high business no matter how you look at it! You've been talking like a fool, Lee!"

Sam Lee stood up, and he smiled at the other.

"You think about boosting the price," said he. "I have to go to find men."

"Find men?" cried the astonished and irate banker. "Ain't Fisher Falls full of men?"

"Of course it is," replied Marshal Sam Lee, "but when I said men, I meant *men*. Good-by!"

With that, he left the bank, while Lewis Fisher sank back into his chair with a renewed interest in life. For, even if he had to lose half a million—six hundred and odd thousand dollars, to be exact—he seemed to have an excellent chance, now, of at least getting some revenge upon the criminals. And he hardly knew which would please him most—to have the money back in his vaults and the matter called square, or to see the scoundrels condemned to spend the rest of their miserable lives in prison. Certainly there was no justice in the law if they were given sentences any smaller!

On the whole, he felt decidedly better, and all that irritated him was that Sam Lee appeared to have come through the interview with flying colors; accordingly, when the editor of the *Evening Democrat* sent him an article purporting to describe the meeting of the marshal and the banker, and saying in a note that accompanied it that it made things rather hot for the marshal, Mr. Fisher did not so much as glance at the manuscript.

He simply scratched on the margin: "O.K. Give him hell!"

And so the document went on to its destiny in the printing press; and Mr. Fisher turned to consider a proposal for the sale of the farm of Jim Pleasant and the stock upon it. The details were laid carefully before him.

There were five hundred acres, nearly all land of the finest quality; they were close enough to the town and the ground rich enough to make a truck garden out of a part of the place. Indeed, Jim Pleasant already had started one. Then there were fine fields where grain crops could be rotated, and

strips by the river where alfalfa grew like mad and offered four large cuttings in a single year. Money had been loaned upon that farm as upon mere grazing land; as a matter of fact, here was a purchaser who was willing to pay a hundred and fifty dollars an acre for the ground alone. Seventy-five thousand dollars! And nothing thrown in—he would pay extra for the buildings, and he would pay for every tool, wagon, and animal on the ground. Particularly he wanted to carry on with the horses. There were seventy-five head of near-thoroughbreds or actual clean-bred ones. And that famous stock was worth close to five hundred a head. Add that on, and the price offered for the Jim Pleasant place by this prospective purchaser was pushed up to close to a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars!

Spot cash, too! This was a millionaire from the East.

But the banker beat his fist upon his desk.

“If that little valley is worth a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars to an Easterner, it’s worth two hundred thousand to me. I’ll make that land worth three hundred an acre, and I’ll raise the cost of one of those Pleasant horses to a thousand dollars. Why, every young rancher and every miner who strikes it rich, and every one who wants to make a splurge has got to have a Pleasant horse under him—why, hell, my friend, that farm is going to be one of the jewels in my crown! It’ll pay me back nearly for the money that I lost in the robbery—by Heaven—yes, there is a Heaven, after all! And I’ll have my recompense!”

You will have observed that there was something of the spirit of the booster about Mr. Fisher, but at the same time he rarely embarked on such flights of fancy as this one. Then, sitting back in his chair, he set his teeth and his eyes puckered almost shut and glittered with pleasure. For what

had he paid for this handsome property, this farm which promised to be a treasure trove?

Mr. Fisher rubbed his hands together. He began to laugh. After all, so long as God spared him his brain, he would be sure to be able to make money!

CHAPTER XXX

IN the meantime, trouble was pouring upon the marshal. For when he wakened the next morning, he found that Fisher Falls was up in arms against him, and the reason was printed in headlines across the *Evening Democrat* of the preceding afternoon.

The marshal was held up as a most doubly-damned traitor to the community. According to that stinging article, Sam Lee had declared that there were no men in Fisher Falls. And the news article was not without lengthy and withering reference to the marshal's recent failure in his office.

In conclusion, on the editorial page the editor with grinding teeth had attempted to make cooler comment upon the marshal's lack of respect for the Fisher Falls population, and in his final paragraph he announced that one no longer could expect real service from the marshal—the years were taking their toll not only of his body but of his brain, and it was high time that Washington should know the status of its representative in this section of the country!

Sam Lee read all of these remarks from the first to the last, and as he consumed his breakfast, he pored over the paper as though he were studying it. Others in the dining-room looked askance at him and frowned darkly, and muttered behind their fists to one another. However, no one addressed him until a young man sauntered cheerfully across the room and tucked his hat under his arm.

"Good morning, Marshal Lee," said he. "I come from the *Evening Democrat*!"

He waited to let this announcement sink in, but Sam Lee was blandly stirring sugar into his coffee, and he merely nodded cheerfully at the youth.

"Well, sir," said the other, "the *Evening Democrat*, it always aims at giving everybody a chance. It doesn't want to stab anybody in the back without giving him a chance to hit back."

"Dear me," murmured Sam Lee, "how interestin' you are! Will you sit down here?"

"Thank you," said the reporter, and he sat down briskly and put his straw hat across his knees. The top of it made an admirable table on which to rest his notebook. He took from an inner pocket a little sheaf of pencils and smiled aggressively at the marshal.

"I'd call that a fair policy," said the marshal. "Your paper would never hit without letting the other fellow hit back?"

"That's exactly it, sir. Our editor says that—"

"I've seen your editor," said Sam Lee thoughtfully. "He has a scar under his right eye, I think?"

"Exactly! And—"

"I'll have to try to remember him," murmured Sam Lee. "Man with policies like that, he ought to be looked up to. For instance, he wouldn't print anything that he wasn't sure was correct?"

"Certainly not!"

"My, how glad I am to hear it! And the editor, he wouldn't even think about doin' such a thing as rollin' over a man whose back was turned to him, would he?"

"Certainly not!" said the reporter.

The soft voice of Sam Lee continued: "Or, if he did, he'd be mighty sure to turn around after he'd driven his steam

roller over the man, and ask him if he wanted to get up and fight it out, fair and square?"

The reporter started to answer, but suddenly he saw that there was no answer to make. Also, he began to notice other details, for he was a youth well suited to his profession, and possessing admirable eyes for small things. He observed that the marshal had been stirring his coffee with a spoon held in his left hand, and that he was now sipping the coffee, holding the cup in the same hand.

Most remarkable of all, when that cup was raised and the smiling lips of old Sam Lee were hidden from view, it was extraordinary to the last degree to notice a change; for it could be seen then that the eyes were not smiling at all. They were as straight and hard and gleaming as the eyes of a wild animal about to spring!

Sam Lee put down his cup. He was still smiling, gently, affably; but the young reporter had seen enough. The right hand of Sam Lee did not appear at all. What devilishness was going on in the mind of this man-killer?

He started to his feet.

"Hold on! You ain't going to run along, young man?"

"I—I just remembered something—I forgot—I'll be back later, if I may! Only—Mr. Lee—I got to ask you one question—did you mean what you said about there being no men in Fisher Falls?"

Said the marshal: "It's a statement I never made."

Suddenly his voice had grown louder, so that it was clearly audible throughout the dining-room.

"It's a statement I never made," repeated the marshal distinctly, "but since it was made for me, perhaps it may as well stand. And if your editor wants fair play—"

"Yes, yes, yes!" stammered the youngster.

"Then tell him that he may as well put into his paper to-day that I'm waiting around, for a little while, to see what Fisher Falls is going to do about what I'm supposed to have said!"

The reporter backed towards the door, much shaken by this badinage. But the calm, clear voice of Sam Lee followed him: "You may as well say to your editor, too, that I'll drop right in on him and find out where he got his idea for that story!"

The reporter turned and fairly fled, and Sam Lee mildly asked for another cup of coffee and sat for a long time over it, always stirring in the sugar with his left hand, using his left hand, also, to raise the cup. The right was free and it was continually fumbling or stroking his cravat—a position which makes it very easy for one to get a revolver from a holster beneath the arm-pit!

There was no need for him to use it, however. Fisher Falls seemed pacified strangely and suddenly, in part by the enormous reputation of this man of the law, and in part by the vast distinction between his quiet self and his famous deeds. He sat in the hotel at Fisher Falls and quietly bearded the entire body of that rough population, and you may be sure that he enjoyed his stay.

In the meantime, he had sent out many telegrams, and as a result, after two days, he began to receive visitors at the hotel. Almost without exception they were slender men burned almost black, and with cheeks so hollow that it seemed that they had been seared by the fire in which they lived. They were all as alike as so many wild-cats; and they possessed much the same characteristics of manner. That is to say, they could sit for hours and hours doing nothing but look at the sky with dreamy eyes, and if the

sun moved onto their faces, it made little difference; for still they could sit and dream. They rolled Bull Durham cigarettes, leisurely, continuously, so that around each man's chair there was sure to be a little golden circle of dust. And that was all they cared to do—to sit, never to speak, to stare at nothingness, to smoke thin cigarettes of their own manufacture. When they rose, it was only because of the dinner bell, and then they seemed almost too weak to stand. They went into the dining-room with stilted steps, and their legs bent much at the knees, as though their strength were giving out. Indeed, as this little collection of the marshal's "friends" grew, they looked not a little like a row of corpses sitting on the veranda of the hotel at Fisher Falls, their hands in their laps, naught about them moving except the pale-blue clouds of cigarette smoke.

There were six of them and no one knew anything about them until the editor managed to get a glimpse of them.

It was difficult for him to get that glimpse because, shortly after the reporter returned to him from the hotel, the editor of the *Evening Democrat* had thrown himself upon his fastest horse and fled for his life. Thereafter, he lived a skulking existence on the borders of Fisher Falls, waiting for the terrible little marshal to leave the town, and in the meantime running his newspaper from afar. Curiosity almost maddened him when he heard about Sam Lee's odd group of visitors. So he desperately ventured into the city and from the roof of a house across the street, he peered at the line of smokers. After he had looked at them for a long time, a pang seized the editor. He sat straight up and began to run his hands through his hair. His lips worked—and finally he slipped away and rushed for his place of retirement on the edges of the town.

There he sat down before a typewriter and plunged into his labors, merely pausing now and again to rummage through a vast and well-sorted collection of photographs which always were at hand. It was not chance that had made Mr. Robert Ezekiel the editor of this growing evening paper; it was labor, keenness, and the inventiveness and good memory of a devil. So, before he had finished his work at the typewriter, he had poured out full three thousand words narrating what he knew about the men who sat with the marshal on the veranda of the hotel.

"Five slayers of men sitting in a row," said the fearless editor, "with Marshal Sam Lee at their head. For what are they waiting? Who is about to die? How many are to be slaughtered by this army of ghostly killers? Gunmen, professional, cunning, dauntless, cruel as eagles and as sure of their prey, how has Sam Lee been enabled to gather them?"

The editor began in this strain.

And then he answered his own questions with a good deal of acumen. The marshal had gathered these fighters for the sake of wiping out the blot on his own fair fame. He had brought them together for the sake of capturing or killing the great Tom Rizdal and his lately famous partner, Pleasant Jim.

That article was read and instantly it was believed, and people began to hold their breaths, for they felt that they were sitting in the presence of a new Iliad, a new battle of the giants.

And then, on a day, six magnificent horses were brought before the hotel, and the little marshal and his five bland and terrible companions mounted the saddles and rode out of Fisher Falls.

CHAPTER XXXI

LEWIS FISHER was the gladdest man in the whole range of the mountains when he saw those men ride by. There was no spirit in them; they slumped sadly in the saddle; they appeared all round-shouldered weaklings; and in listless fashion they went, Sam Lee at the head, and the rest trailing out in single file, as though already they were riding some narrow mountain way.

They were armed to the teeth, with rifles, revolvers, and long, cruel knives; and the packs behind their saddles were significantly small; it was plain that they meant to live on the country, like veritable Indians, and only grossest idiots would have doubted their ability to do so. Such men as these could enter a thousand miles of desert with a rifle and some salt, and come out on the farther side fatter than when he entered the sea of heat. And if they did not pour out of Fisher Falls with ringing cheers and much swinging of their hats, all the more token that they would stick to the trail with the patience of wolves. It did not occur to people to doubt that they would win their victory, even with Long Tom Rizdal and Pleasant Jim staked against them. So Lewis Fisher stood at the window of his bank and grinned a great grin, and seemed to drink in the air of a cruel satisfaction.

There was a stir beside him.

"Uncle Lewis, I'd like to be riding out with them!"

"Don't be a damn young fool," said the uncle. "Lee would

laugh himself almost to death if he was to hear you say that!"

"I don't think he would. I'd like to try!"

"You lie!" said Lewis Fisher. He always rather scorned to hunt for pretty words, but had preferred since he gathered his first million, to speak his thoughts in an outright fashion. Let the chips fall where they might! "You lie," said the banker. "You're trying to throw a bluff and impress me. You'd be scared to death if you were riding on their errand. You know it; I know it; so let's stop arguin' about it. Go back to your desk! Or else live up to your talk, get on a horse, and ask Marshal Lee to take you along!"

This terrible and disgusted speech was hurled fairly in the face of the nephew. He was a pale and hollow-chested young man who looked habitually upon the ground, only raising his eyes in flashes and those flashes usually not of a pleasant sort.

He was not very industrious and he was not overly intelligent, but for the banker he had two overwhelming recommendations. On the one hand, he carried what the rich man felt to be among the best first names in the world: Lewis. On the other hand he fortunately possessed the final family name of Fisher!

In other words, there was a second Lewis Fisher, and often the banker, dreaming through cigar smoke, probing the vast future, fingering the outlines of the future, told himself that fate had given this youth that name of Lewis, foreknowing that the banker would have no son of his own. However, by fortune both father and mother of the lad were gone; there was no fence between Lewis Fisher the First, and his assured successor to the bank presidency and all the far-flung fortunes of the originator of the bank. In a word, the boy was,

in the eyes of Lewis Fisher the First, the one priceless jewel in the world, for he was the one jewel without which life for the rich man would be converted into very much of a joke—all purpose and final point would be removed, in short!

As he delivered this volley to put his heir in his proper place, Mr. Fisher Senior strode on past him. It was characteristic of the banker that, having made his point, he never dreamed of looking again to make sure that his auditor had accepted his remark at its pretended value.

Now he failed to see the face of his jewel wither into shame and fury.

Five minutes later, young Lewis Fisher had jumped into a saddle and was riding furiously out of the town. A slowly moving wisp of dust hung in the air, as he passed through an avenue of trees; a little further and he saw the long and slender line of six riders winding up a hill-face.

He plunged for them and came at once to Sam Lee. He was no longer in the van but in the rear—where the dust was sure to be the thickest, but his bandanna was serving its greatest purpose and through it as a seive he sifted the dust from the pure air.

Even this short canter had powdered the clothes of Lewis with white. But he was regardless of his appearance as he drew up beside the marshal.

“Hello!” said the latter. “What’s the news, son?”

“Do you know my name?” asked the boy.

“I dunno that I do.”

Young Lewis nearly fell from his saddle. He felt that hardly a blind man could be able to ride into Fisher Valley without being informed about the great double star which reigned over the district—the Fisher Stars, in other words. But now he was disclaimed.

"No," he answered, however, "my uncle, he crowds into the limelight all the time and takes all the credit for everything. Why should anybody know what I look like? My name's Lewis Fisher," he finished.

And he waited with a vain smile broadening upon his lips.

"How are you, Fisher," said the marshal. "Any trouble back there in the town that brought you out here to me?"

"There's trouble," replied the boy, "but it's trouble that bothers me, and not most people."

"Go on."

"Marshal Lee, I got to make a name for myself!"

"Every young man does. Go on."

"The old man, he plugged away and got famous making money. Well, I hate to sit at a desk all my life. And, besides, I want to do something quick. The old man thinks that I'm a worm. By God, I'll show him that I'm not!"

Thick as the dust was, it had not settled upon his face thickly enough to disguise the strange green of his complexion as he said this. Malice and hate and envy fairly choked him.

The marshal waited, not amused, very attentive.

"Lee, I want to go with you!" said the boy huskily. "Will you let me come?"

Sam Lee shook his head.

"I got enough," he said. "These are all hand-picked. Besides, you know I ain't hunting black bears that'll take to the trees!"

"Don't I know it? Of course I know it! Marshal, you give me a chance to fly with you in this hunt, and I'll play my hand as well as the next one."

"Can you shoot, Fisher?" asked Sam Lee, with the air of one who does not wish to be blunt and rude in a refusal.

"I can, and I will, what's more," said Lewis Fisher the Second.

"Of course you will," said Marshal Lee. "Of course you'll shoot, and I can see that you're a game young feller. And one of these days I'd be glad to have you along with me, but you know what they used to say in the silly old stories about the dead shots, son?"

"I know a lot of nonsense about people that never missed. Well?"

"Well, Lew, that's what these old boys are. They can miss their targets, sometimes, but they never miss their men. They're what the old books used to talk about. They're dead shots. They ain't a one of them that hasn't averaged three hours a day for thirty years working with rifles and revolvers, drawing 'em, shooting 'em, cleaning 'em, taking 'em apart, putting 'em together, loving their Colts like their children. You understand what I mean? They're the kind that never miss!"

Young Lewis Fisher, breathing very hard, looked full into the face of his companion and then his lower jaw thrust out a little, which is apt to be the sign of a man with a fighting spirit.

"Gimme a try, will you, Lee?" he asked suddenly. "I haven't had thirty years, or even twenty. But since I was fifteen—that's eight years ago, I've fairly lived with a gun and waited for a chance to use it! Does that sound a little more to you?"

"There's a tree, and there's a blaze on the side of that branch. Don't let that hold you back, none, if it looks like a proper target to you. Just blaze away."

"Thanks," said the boy, and instantly he whipped out a Colt and fired.

It was a thin little branch with a white notch in it, and the bullet passed cleanly through the mark, at which the branch sagged slowly downwards.

"All right," said the boy, "gimme something else to hit. Give me something moving, Lee. That's what I can do pretty well."

"You've done enough," said the marshal rather dryly, "and if you want to go along with us, you're damn welcome, my son. But you can't travel in those togs that you got on."

"Can't I?" cried the boy, joy ringing in his throat suddenly as he heard the decision. "Lee, you've promised me that I can go, and you can't go back on your promise, y'understand? I'll be damned before I go back to get other togs. You'd be too far away to catch before I could start again, and if these clothes aren't too good for a bank they're not too good for the funeral of Long Tom and Pleasant Jim. My gad, what a trip it's gunna be, Sam Lee!"

The marshal himself had been very young, and though that was a good many years ago, he never had forgotten. Now an actual sympathy gleamed in his eyes as he regarded the boy.

"I think that you're going to do some good for us, Lew," said he. "What about your uncle, though? What will he have to say when he hears that I've kidnaped you?"

"He'll have to say," declared the boy, "that I have something better to do than to waste my time in a damned bank. My God, Lee, I'm the happiest man in the world!"

"Good," smiled the marshal, "but just you watch your work every day on this trail, because if you don't, you might change from the happiest man in the world into the deadest!"

So spoke the marshal, almost prophetically!

CHAPTER XXXII

THERE were three great matters for Jim Pleasant. One was how he was to return to a peaceful and hard-working life to raise horses; the second and most important concerned his peculiar emotions concerning Sally, which he felt would wear away were he once back at his familiar tasks; the third was that which had to do with the danger from the long arm of the law, and to this he paid the least attention, because for one thing he trusted himself, for another he trusted his companions, and in the third place he was enormously sure that no horse in the world could bring danger near him so long as he had the four strong legs of the stallion, the Leinster Gray, beneath him.

The working point was the matter of his return to his old concerns, and in this he felt that he made no progress. He began to distrust the big man, Long Tom, and his good-natured assurances that everything would be well in the end.

So his discontent grew.

They were domiciled, for the moment, in a small mountain-shack, waiting for the dust of their latest exploit to settle. The farmer and the farmer's wife and son were their servants, cooking for them, waiting on them in every conceivable manner. And life should have been easy enough had not divine discontent continually stirred in the breast of Pleasant Jim.

He began to press Long Tom. When was his return to

the ways of peace to be arranged? Where and how would he go back to normal life? Long Tom, with a really touching patience, assured him that in the end he would be able to arrange everything. But what was to be done in the interim except to retain his patience. He had schemes on foot, said Long Tom, which would give his companion everything that he wanted.

So Pleasant Jim continued to wait, and his temper grew more sullenly restless every moment. He was up early and he was awake late. He found on the place half a dozen unbroken mustangs and it was his diversion for a little while to handle them; but they were intelligent enough to understand when they had met a master, and after a few sessions with them, he could not raise an interesting session with them even when he worked his spurs overtime. They became so tame that they even lifted their ears cheerfully when they saw him coming, and he could catch them in the pasture without a rope.

The farmer was charmed and amazed by this performance, which he declared bordered upon the miraculous, but Pleasant Jim was disgusted. He wanted occupation to fill those big hands of his, and he was dismayed by the prospect of quiet.

He hunted, too. But hunting could not be carried on at any great distance, for always he must be close to signal-sight of the shack in case of an alarm. He managed to get a few rabbits and squirrels every day; two deer walked un-luckily within the range of his rifle; and one strong black bear, a nervous and inquisitive fellow, came to the end of both nerves and curiosity when he stepped into the charmed circle and received a steel-jacketed bullet.

The skinning and the curing of the hide occupied Pleasant Jim a little, also. And, indeed, the story of his life in the hills would have been an eventful chapter in the careers of most men. It was not enough for him. Eagerly, hungrily, he sought more occupation. A set of boxing gloves were snapped up. Long Tom would not pay any attention to many invitations to put them on, but Charlie Rizdal tried twice or thrice. He could not stand to the fast handwork and the terrible shoulder power of Pleasant Jim, and no matter if the latter tried to strike softly, he could not control his strength when he saw an opening any more than a bear can control the power of its forepaws. So ennui began to settle upon Pleasant Jim, and he concentrated upon his last means for diversion, which was Sally.

There was never a moment when he was not besetting her for a walk, a talk, a ride together, and though she dodged him on one pretext after another, he managed to spend a great many hours with her and so to increase his peculiar feeling of joy and sorrow when she was near.

Sally had changed a great deal. She was not so full of slang and fire; she was more reserved, gentle, quiet, and there was about her smile and her voice something out of a new world. Pleasant Jim sensed it. But he could not tell whether she actually had altered or whether he simply was beginning to know her better.

In his present humor, however, all his senses were sharpened, and two things he very clearly made out: the first was that she really liked to be with him and the second was that she was filled with terror every instant she was in his company. Of course that did not help to clear away the mystery; and finally all other employments were dropped for the sake of Sally. The family on the farm laughed openly; even an

infant could have seen what was wrong with this big man who dogged the steps of a girl day and night, waited for her in the morning, teased her to stay up later at night, and brought to her the head and skin of the deer he killed, and the mask and pelt of the bear.

Pleasant Jim was aware that the other two men felt he was paying too much attention to the girl. It made Charlie restless, and Long Tom's brow often was clouded. But as for the opinion of any one in the world, Pleasant had not the slightest care. Nothing is so desperate as ennui.

He was explained to himself by sheerest chance. They started for a ride in the early morning, the two of them, and as he helped the girl up into the saddle, her horse moved and she slipped back into his arms. It seemed to Pleasant that she fitted into them with miraculous neatness and at the touch of her body a wave of dizzy joy passed over his brain. He held Sally close to him and kissed her twice upon the lips before she thrust herself away from him.

She was actually pale with fear; but it was not Pleasant alone that seemed to frighten her. Instead, her glance wandered towards the house and the barn anxiously.

He came after her, only acutely aware of his great discovery.

"Sally, I want you!" said he. "That's what's wrong. I love you, Sally. Do you hear? Look at me! Tell me what you think! I love you, Sally!"

Sally shrank away from him, found her horse, and acted as though she would have mounted, if not in fear that he would catch her the instant her back was turned.

"Don't come near me—don't touch me!" she stammered. "Don't!"

"I won't poison you!" said Pleasant, frowning. "And if

you take it that way, I won't trouble you none. Hell and fire, Sally, you just despise me, don't you!"

Still she looked not at him, but towards the house and then towards the barn and the horse shed near it.

"Of course I don't despise you. Only, there's danger. Dear Jim, do have sense. Don't come an inch nearer!"

She was whiter than ever, but she began to laugh; and the laughter was a sadly staggering sound. The excitement of Pleasant Jim shook him from head to foot.

"What's wrong, Sally?" said he.

"Will you let me get on my horse—and not come any nearer?"

"Well, yes. Will you tell me then?"

"Yes!"

He stood frowning while she mounted, but once in the saddle she forgot her promise and fled with whip and spur across the valley and into the trees on the farther side. Her horse was very swift and she rode like a jockey, but for all of that, she had something almost as quick as fate behind her, and that was the Leinster Gray. The big stallion was mounted at one bound by Pleasant, and went like an arrow in pursuit.

Through the trees he sped and Sally's bay was seen dodging out of sight in a thicket.

Through the thicket crashed the Gray, mad with the excitement that quivered down from the hands of his rider, and in a clearing beyond, the iron hand of Pleasant caught the reins of the bay and brought it to a halt.

Sally, panting and wild of eye, dropped the reins and raised her hands rather blindly in self-defense.

"My God, Sally," cried Jim Pleasant, "what's wrong? Why d'you act like this? Am I poison to you, maybe?"

She lowered her hands, and stared at him with a desperate appeal in her eyes.

"I won't hurt you," he said hastily. "Now tell me what's the matter. I only chased you to find out what's wrong!"

"I'm afraid!" stammered Sally.

"Afraid of what? God A'mighty, we been through enough together. Can't you trust me?"

"I—" she began.

And then, sighing as though she had taken a great resolution: "Jim, you see, I'm going to marry Long Tom!"

She had spoken very much as though he had drawn a gun, and the effect upon Pleasant Jim was almost as decisive. He stiffened, and the Leinster Gray, on edge from this burst of running, sprang sideways a stride.

"You're gunna marry Long Tom!" muttered Pleasant. "Well, I been a damn fool and a swine. But I didn't guess. I didn't aim to say such a thing as I've said, never guessing that you loved Long Tom."

"I didn't say that I love—" she began. And then checked herself. "I mean," she added, "that it's all right. Only—you understand."

"I don't understand nothing," he assured her. "Why didn't you blat out the minute that I touched you: 'I belong to Tom Rizdal'? That would of stopped me, and you ought to of known it. And then you turn around and tell me that you're going to marry him, but you don't love him. Sally, what's the meaning of that? Why should you marry him if you don't love him? What hold has he got on you?"

Sally looked at him as at a creature who cannot be persuaded.

"I do care for him. I can't explain anything. Only—

you never must touch me again. Will you promise that?"

"Right quick I'll promise it," said he sourly. "I don't force myself on nobody, I hope!"

And he rode suddenly through the brush and back towards the house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IF his humor had been dark and restless before, it became settled and black as night thereafter.

That evening he was asked by Long Tom and Charlie to play a hand of poker, but for an answer he rose and strode silently from the house. The two men looked blankly at one another.

"What's happened to the Big Boy?" asked Charlie Rizdal.

"Why do you ask me?" said Sally, strangely on fire. "I can't read his mind!"

And she slammed out of the room and went to bed.

Long Tom continued to shuffle the cards, looking down to them with an evil smile.

"Something has got to happen," he said at length, "speaking personal. Something has got to happen, and pretty damned pronto."

"Not to Pleasant?" asked Charlie Rizdal.

"That'd hurt you a lot, wouldn't it?" exclaimed Long Tom. "You aren't aching to see him done for, are you?"

"His killing would be worth about a quarter of a million," responded Charlie, full of thought.

"By God," breathed Long Tom, "sometimes I think that you got the soul of a rat, Charlie! D'you think that I'd shoot him for his money? No, if he has to go down, his money goes to charity! And in his name. Something for the world to remember him by, because he's worth remembering, I'd say. I've never met a man like him!"

"I see that you're fond of him," said Charlie, with cunning malice touching upon the right string. "I see that you're pretty fond of him, but for all of that, I guess that you ain't as fond of him as Sally is! There's something between them. They're acting like a pair of lovers that have had a falling out."

Long Tom said nothing, but continued to shuffle the cards, and then with a fluent skill he began to deal them so rapidly that they fell in a brightly glinting shower upon the table. Three hands he dealt. And Charlie picked them up and turned them.

"I see," said he, chuckling softly. "I do the bucking. *He* makes the high bet, and you win the pot!"

Long Tom answered nothing, but swept up the cards once more and began to deal again. It was said that he could have made an excellent living as a gambler if he had not gone in for a greater game. At any rate, once more he ran up the pack, and once more he dealt with his accustomed speed and sureness.

Charlie did not turn the cards over. He was too interested in what he had in mind.

"I'll tell you what, Tom," said he, "there's only one way out of this for us. Sally is out of her head about him."

"She likes him. She's got reason to," said the chief. "But that's all right."

"Sure it is, if you say so. Otherwise, I would of thought that she was sort of—well, let it go! Pleasant will ride off with her, one of these days, pretty quick!"

Long Tom flicked the hands over, read their faces with a glance, and swept them into a firm pack again. He worked with the very tips of his fingers, apparently, and one hardly would have asked for a more open shuffler.

"Charlie," said his older brother, "you're fine, and I'm damn fond of you. But you live small; you think small; and you can't figure what's gunna happen to big people. The girl likes Jim. She ought to; he was a man when they were adrift together."

"Maybe, maybe!" said Charlie. "But on the other hand, you got to see that perhaps she didn't tell you everything. Pleasant ain't a saint!"

At this, Long Tom instinctively reached for a gun, but after a black moment he drew his empty hand from beneath his coat. Slowly he mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"You're a poisonous devil, Charlie," he said at length. "Hating him the way that you do, it's a wonder to me that you can keep on smiling at him every day!"

"I'm waiting," said Charlie Rizdal. "I don't commit suicide, that's all."

"But he's got to die, so far as you're concerned?"

"Sure he does, and so far as you're concerned, too; if you're what I think you are."

Suddenly Long Tom crossed the room and struck on the door of the girl.

A complaining, weary voice answered him.

"It's Tom," he said. "Come here a minute, Sally."

She came to the door and opened it a little and stood a dim glimmer of whiteness in the black of the room.

"What's happened between you and the Big Boy?"

"Who said anything had happened?"

"We have eyes, old girl."

"I had to tell him that I—belong—to—you!"

And she closed the door softly. Long Tom remained before it as though he were about to call to her once more, but

thinking better of that idea, he turned and went back with his noiseless step to the table, and sat down there.

"Well?" said Charlie.

Long Tom cast at him a withering glance.

"You're right," he said at length. "Something's got to be done."

"Sure it has," went on Charlie, smoothly expanding the thought. "She's heading off Pleasant because she's afraid that you'll see how much she loves him and then——"

Long Tom started up and cast down the cards. They slipped from the edge of the table and cascaded to the floor.

"Oh, damn your rotten heart!" said he softly, and went from the room into the outer night.

Charlie remained alone, and with an absent air, he collected the fallen cards. He was smiling a little with a fox-like content.

"It seemed to be about my turn," said he to himself, "to take a little hand in the game."

And he began to shuffle with hardly less skill than his older and more talented brother had shown.

In the meantime, Long Tom, striding through the dark, was confronted suddenly by a form as tall as and a little more powerful than his own.

"Well, Jim," said he, "you're in the dumps to-night. Still thinking about the farm?"

"I'm thinking about the girl," said Pleasant, speaking instantly from his heart. "How come that you're to have her, Tom, when as a matter of fact she don't love you?"

Long Tom considered this remark for a long moment; as a truth, he dared not trust his voice, at once.

"Did she tell you that?" he asked, finally.

"No, I guessed it," said Pleasant in haste, feeling that he

must not betray her. "Anybody can see by watching her when she's with you!"

"You think you know her, but wait awhile and you'll see that there's more to her than you guess," suggested the bandit. "You can't read Sally in one minute, and you can't read her in two. But now, I've got an idea. If I send you down to Kentucky, I know where you can pick up and start again, Jim. You can have your horse farm, and I'll steer you to it. You want the details?"

"Horse farm?" said Pleasant. "I pretty near forgot that there was such a thing in the world. What's important to me—well, it ain't horses!"

"What is it?" asked Rizdal.

"Excitement is what we live for," said Jim Pleasant. "And I want my share. I'm going to stick with you fellows, Tom. I've made up my mind to it."

"Ah?" said Long Tom.

"I've had my taste of high life, and I like it pretty well. You understand?"

"Of course," said Long Tom. "Of course I understand. You want to see a few more banks crack open. Well—you'll have it your own way. Of course I've always wanted you with us permanent, right from the first. Are you going back to the house?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"No, I'm walking on for a while!"

So Pleasant went back to the house. He felt that he had come out fairly well from his talk with Long Tom. At least he had brought their relations out into the open, and that was a great point, for he hated to work in the dark. Now Tom knew that he wanted the girl, and from that moment, let each man take his own advantage.

And as for Sally? Well, he still hoped. She was an odd person, and it was hard to understand her, but the hardest trail usually can be solved by time and patience spent on it!

In his room at the shack, he saw that Charlie Rizdal already was in bed and breathing regularly, so he turned in at once. For a moment he stared at the darkness, then sleep formed over his brain; dusky forms in imitation of life passed across his mind, and his eyes closed.

The moment his breathing changed, there was a rustle in the window; and that instant his scattered consciousness returned to him. He was wide awake, every sense on the alert and the gun which never left him, day or night, gripped in his hand.

Yet he did not stir, and instead of letting his breathing alter, he began to snore a little, rhythmically and regularly.

And all the while the bright shadow of danger was growing in the room. Trifle by trifle he turned his head until he saw the dim silhouette of a man's head and shoulders against the stars beyond the window, and the glitter of steel in his hand—

His own gun he snatched over his head and fired; the answering shot boomed heavily and the slug tore at the wall beside him.

He was out of the bed with a bound, but the window was empty, and when he reached it, he had only a fleeting impression of some one running around the corner of the house.

Another man would have stood a moment to curse, or else turned and hurried down to the door. Pleasant Jim slipped through the window and dropped like a cat to the ground, gun in hand, and then sprang in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"Who fired that shot!" shouted the familiar voice of Long Tom, and as Pleasant turned the corner of the shack, he encountered the latter running from the door of the house.

Into the stomach of Tom Rizdal he thrust the muzzle of his Colt.

"Rizdal," he said savagely, "you tried that on me yourself!"

"You're a fool, Jim," said the other without excitement.

"Think it over, and you'll see that you'll have to admit that you're a fool. Look at my guns. Have either of 'em had a shot fired out of 'em?"

"Then where's the man?" asked Pleasant.

"Yonder!" said Tim Rizdal, and nodded.

Across the valley swept a shadow with the speed of a bird on the wing. It was a horseman riding at full gallop and heading away as fast as his mount could leg it.

"You're right," said Jim Pleasant, "and I'm a worse fool than you said. Excuse me, Tom."

"Forget about it," replied the gunman. "What's happened?"

The house was in confusion.

"Some one started to take a shot at me while I was in bed. But I got a hunch, spied him, and beat him to it by a shade."

"Did you nick him?"

"I dunno. It was a snap shot over my head. But I may have touched him."

"He rides like it!"

The sharp voice of Sally came bursting from her room: "Jim! Jim Pleasant! Where are you?"

"Here!"

"You're not hurt, Jim?"

"Me? Not a bit. What made you think that I might be?"

"I heard the noise in your room. I— What happened?"

"I dunno," said Pleasant Jim, "except that somebody may of spotted us and come down here to clean up a big reward and get a reputation by doing some midnight murders. That's about the caliber of some gents. But as soon as there was a little gun-talk, he changed his mind."

"It was that sneak of a boy, Pete!" said Sally, speaking of the farmer's son.

"There's Pete now," answered Pleasant. "And him that tried this snap shot at me was twice bigger in the shoulders than Pete. Besides, he cut away across the valley. I never seen a faster move in my life!"

"What'll we do?" asked Charlie Rizdal, hurrying down the stairs. "How'll we get Emmet, for this?"

"Emmet?" cried Sally. "Do you mean Dick Emmet?"

"That's who I mean."

"How could you tell?"

"I seen the side of his face against the stars, and I recognized him, too, in the flash of his own gun. It ain't hard to recognize Dick Emmet's broken nose."

"He'd never do it!" said the girl.

"Wouldn't he? Men'll do a lot for ten thousand dollars!"

"What'll we do? Trail him?" asked Charlie.

"We'll go to bed and get our sleep out," said Pleasant Jim, and straightway he went up the stairs.

The others followed him with their eyes; and when he

had disappeared, they presently heard the creak of the bed as he threw himself down on it, and then a faint sound of whistling of an old tune.

"He's happy!" said Sally. "He—he liked it!"

"Sure," answered Charlie Rizdal. "That's just a night-cap, sort of, for Pleasant!"

"Are you going to bed, Sally?"

"Yes. Good night."

"You ain't upset?"

"No, I'm all right."

She disappeared, and the Rizdals stepped out into the darkness.

"Did you see what he did?" asked Tom Rizdal.

"Aw, I was only faking sleep. I was watching every trick. I had an idea that something would happen to-night."

"I thought I had him for a dead man," said Tom. "I was about to pick him off while he snored. The snoring was a sort of a light, you might say, to guide my shot. And then he twitched a gun over his head before I could wink—right in the middle of a snore, as you might say."

"He's a snake," said Charlie Rizdal. "Of course he was faking, too."

"Naturally. He suspected something."

"How did you have the nerve to meet him when he came down?"

"I ran out the door asking who'd fired the shot. He came around the corner on the jump and shoved a gun into my stomach before I could draw. How did *he* get down so quick?"

"He jumped through the window. Speaking of fighting men, he's a breed all off by himself."

"He accused me. I think he would have murdered me,

too. But then I saw somebody streaking down the valley. Must have been some rustler who thought that the shots were meant for him and hit the high spots getting out. That lucky chance was what saved my life!"

"Of course it was. He ain't pleasant to have a run in with, is he?"

"No, old son. And we both know it, now!"

"Sally took it hard."

"She suspects something," agreed Tom Rizdal. "But she'll get over it."

"Only," said Charlie, "God knows how you ever came to think of such a thing."

"Meaning what?"

"That it's not your style."

"Anything's my style. Fair and free fighting, if that will serve. If not—then anything to get the wrong man out of the way. You don't know me, Charlie! Nobody does. But the flash of my gun gave you your first real glimpse of me to-night. Don't fool yourself, though. I can go straight and be faithful. You know that. Play my game and you'll never stop thanking God that you have me for a brother!"

So, frankly, without shame, they discussed the matter.

"Emmet won't thank you," said Tom.

"He won't have a chance either for thinking or for thanking," said Charlie Rizdal. "He'll die so fast when Pleasant comes up to him!"

And the older brother chuckled.

"What did you do with the gun you'd used?" asked Charlie.

"Chucked it into the brush as I slipped down the side of the house. Of course I figured on every chance and was carrying three guns instead of two. Now, let's go to bed."

"Listen," said Charlie, as they stepped back into the house.

They heard a faint snoring from the story above them. All the rest of the house was already quiet, for the poor farmer's family, in terror of its dreadful guests, had slipped away to their own beds as soon as they could. The air of the night was heavy in the house, and the stale scent of cookery hung in the room.

"Is he really asleep or simply faking again?" asked Charlie thoughtfully.

"I dunno," answered Long Tom. "But this I do know: I'm not going to go investigating!"

And he went off to bed.

Of course there was much talk during the next day about the strange happenings of the previous evening, and all joined in with conjectures and surmises; but the idea of a head-hunter having made the attempt was the idea which was most convincing to every one, apparently.

Long Tom, finding himself later beneath a scrub-oak with Sally near by brooding over a book, said: "You haven't turned a page in half an hour, Sally. What are you doing?"

"Standing at the window with the head-hunter," said Sally slowly, without lifting her eyes. "If I'd wanted to kill only one man, I'd have done just that—stood at the window and taken a careful shot, but if I'd been out for a big handsome reward, I should have slipped softly in through the window—and tried to bag two men!"

"Of course," nodded Long Tom. "But the scoundrel didn't have the nerve, you see. He was a coward."

"No real coward," replied the girl, "stalks a house where Long Tom and Jim Pleasant are living. No, there's something very odd about this whole affair!"

"What do you make out of it, then?"

She raised her head and watched the monotonous faint shifting of the upper branches and the odd patterning of the light as it slipped through.

"I don't know," she said softly.

She added after a moment: "Tom, if anything should happen to him—"

"To whom?"

"To Pleasant Jim."

"Well?"

"I think that you and I would have to say good-by!"

He started up and glared down at her.

"Are you tying me up with that bit of dirty work that was tried last night?" he asked.

She did not answer. She merely closed her eyes and her brow still was wrinkled with the effort of thought. However, when she looked up again she did not speak, and suddenly the tongue of Long Tom clove against the roof of his mouth and he felt himself growing paler.

"Well?" he asked huskily again.

"I'm not going to talk to Jim," said the girl. "I'm just telling you!"

CHAPTER XXXV

UP through the mountains, softly and steadily, never rushing their horses, and yet never favoring them, went the procession of Sam Lee, Federal Marshal.

It mattered not a whit to these veterans that he recently had been balked in a public and signal manner. On the contrary, they valued him rather for what he was than for what he had done, and they knew that his shot was as straight and his draw was as swift as that of any of his followers. They knew that he had planned this campaign with a sufficient cunning, and they were therefore, considering their ample pay, quite ready to serve under him.

Sometimes, at first, they looked a little askance upon their youngest and most lately added companion, until a deer flicked through the brush two hundred yards ahead of them and the man who stopped it with a brilliant snap-shot was no other than young Lewis Fisher.

After that, they asked no more questions. If he were a little green and raw about camp and hardly knew what to do with himself or his blankets, they were perfectly willing to show him and, in a measure, to take care of him. For such a shot was worth having along, and might help to enrich them all.

Besides, they pointed out rightly that he was the seventh member of the party, and therefore good luck must be in him! All, therefore, was going well with the party, whether it were considered spiritually or physically.

In the meantime, it was apparent that the marshal was not proceeding to make a blind cast. On the contrary, he was constantly receiving reports from people who rode suddenly into the camp or came up with them on the day's march. He had set out not before the telegraph and the telephone had prepared the way before him as nearly as possible.

Therefore, no one was disturbed when a rough mountaineer rode freely up to them just as they were scattering for an evening halt and gave a letter to the marshal.

He read it as the stranger disappeared again down the gorge.

It ran thus:

"My dear Sam Lee,

"If you can't have all of the men you want to get, at least you ought to be glad enough to get one of the three—and given to you for nothing.

"They have heard how you're passing through the mountains, and they feel that you can do them and yourself a good turn by showing up at the Newberg shack just after sunset Thursday night—which will make easy marching for you.

"If you come up to the place, you'll find no resistance. The two Rizdals will be out of the way, and young Pleasant will be there alone. You couldn't ask for anything better than that!"

There was no signature to this strange epistle.

But the marshal remained studying it for a long time, by the last of the daylight and then by the fire. He had in his pocket a number of letters and other documents, wrapped

in a section of oiled silk, and these he now began to compare with the letter which had newly arrived.

The latter was printed out roughly in sprawling characters, as if by one who desired to disguise his handwriting, but the worthy marshal had deciphered handwriting before and taken a prolonged and special course in that intricate and uncertain science. He was, indeed, an expert, quite capable of having run a department in a magazine and analyzing the characters of his correspondents.

When he had finished his survey, which meant the free use of a magnifying glass from time to time, he next took out his writing materials and wrote a letter in turn. He composed it with care and with deliberation, and when he had finished, he called young Lew Fisher to one side.

"Lew," said he, "you've showed up well on this trip, and on the whole I think you have in you the makin' of a mountaineer!"

Lewis Fisher, prospective millionaire, half closed his eyes and blinked with joy at the most delightful words he ever had heard.

"But now," went on the chief, "I'm gunna give you a trial, and a real trial. I want you to take this letter and ride on ahead through the mountains to King's Gap and through the gap and on to the lower plateau beyond. There you'll come to a fork in the trail and one part of the trail will run to the right down hill and the other part will go straight ahead and climb a little. The right fork is well-traveled, and the left fork is most likely pretty blind. But be sure to take the left fork. Then you'll come to lava rocks, and the trail will go out altogether. You'll go five or ten miles through the rocks, and when you get on the farther side, you'll have to cut for sign again, and when you've found

the path again, you follow on until you've reached a narrow valley, and there be on the watch because when you come to it you've come to enemy's country, where bullets will be fired before questions will be asked. Follow that ravine up until it broadens a little, and in the center of the broadest part, with a spottings of brush and trees all around it, you'll find a shack called the Newberg shack. Now, son, I want you to get close to that shack and find young Jim Pleasant—"

"And kill him! And, by God, I'll do it!" exclaimed Lewis Fisher. "Wouldn't Uncle Lewis go nearly wild if I were to kill Pleasant?"

"Hold on!" said the marshal. "You can kill a man from a distance, if you can catch a sight of him, but you've got a much harder job than that to tackle. You've got to get to Pleasant and stand up and pass that letter into his hand, without getting a bullet passed into your body first. You understand?"

The boy listened to this proposal with a gray face.

"I understand," he said with stiff lips.

The marshal studied him intently.

"You're scared," he said frankly, "but that sort of a scare doesn't paralyze a man, and I think that you're going to do pretty well, Lew. When can you start?"

"When I've finished saddling my horse."

"Wait a minute. You like that black mare that I've been riding, don't you?"

"She's the finest thing I've ever seen in horseflesh. I think she's finer than the Leinster Gray!"

"She ain't, though," said the marshal with a sigh. "I've rode them both and I know the differences between them.

However, she'll run true and straight till she drops, and she'll never let you down on a long or a hard trail. Take her along with you. She's your horse!"

Lew Fisher had received many and handsomer presents from his rich uncle. He had received houses, land, blocks of stock, but never had he received a gift such as this—on the field of battle, so to speak. And he grew whiter with joy than he had been with fear.

"Yes!" said Lew Fisher huskily.

"Mind you," said the marshal quietly in parting from his young recruit, "you might be able to get up close enough to kill Jim Pleasant, but that's not the trick. I want him to have this letter. It's more than twice as important as his death. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Then saddle the black and go as fast as you can!"

Lew Fisher did exactly as he had been told to do. He saddled the black and went as fast as he could.

It was a hard and a lonely expedition; never before had he been alone among the dusty gray faces of the mountains, or ridden through the dreary, pine-covered uplands. In a hundred glades he could have dropped dead and never his body been found till the end of time.

And a funereal sense of failure to come oppressed young Lew Fisher. He began to think fondly about Fisher Falls, in the far distance, and suppose that he should turn to the side down one of the long, easy valleys, and start to return—afterwards he could manage some excuse—he could say that he had fallen sick—he could say anything! But not to ride on into this certain failure where failure was death!

But somehow he kept going, and it was very much as

though that brave-headed black mare had taken the matter into her own possession and decided with her brightly pricking ears to carry her new master straight on to his destiny.

He grew rather afraid of her. Once he pulled her deliberately away from the trail and rode for half a mile among the pines, but when he gave her her own head she wound straight ahead among the trees—and eventually came out on the correct trail once more.

Perspiration burst out on the forehead of Lew Fisher—a sadly sunburned forehead it was, now—and he felt that destiny had taken bodily possession of him.

However, there was one advantage. He would surrender to the inevitable and let her do as she chose, since after all she could not be opposed.

In this manner he completed the journey, and crossed the pass and took the left fork at the trail, and then he entered the narrow and dangerous ravine, but he rode on boldly, without forethought—for God or the devil must handle this matter of his fate, not he!

And in due time, the trees before him scattered more and more widely.

Suddenly he saw before him a tall man riding on a great gray horse—and young Fisher snatched his rifle from its long scabbard beneath his leg and covered the stranger.

Right into the sights rode the big fellow and the great gray. Now the man alone was in the sights, and now his head—

A dead bead! Ten thousand dollars and fame as well for a single touch on the trigger! And Lew Fisher trembled with desire to shoot.

What held him back was not altogether shame to take advantage of an unsuspecting man, and neither was it alto-

gether the behest of the marshal; it was rather a sense that Fate had brought him purposely and swiftly to Jim Pleasant.

So, still drawing his bead, he called: "Pleasant!"

And Jim Pleasant stopped his horse with a jerk of the reins.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THEN, when mentally he twice had put a bullet through the head of the famous warrior, Lew Fisher lowered his rifle regretfully into the hollow of his left arm.

"I had you, Pleasant!" he exclaimed, in the raucous voice of triumph.

His nerves were wonderfully soothed by the steady and instant retort.

"You had me, kid, and you had me dead to rights. I must have been riding blind. I walked right into that gun!"

The malice of one who could have killed, had he so chosen, diminished suddenly in the breast of Lew Fisher. The voice was so deep, so gentle, so manly, that it touched the best and most hidden chords in his breast.

"All right," said Fisher, "but there was ten thousand and a good deal of reputation right there under my trigger finger!"

"There was ten thousand dollars, all right," admitted Pleasant Jim with his perfect good nature. "Maybe some reputation, too. Why didn't you shoot, stranger?"

And the answer started unbidden from the lips of Fisher: "My God, man, it would have been murder, you having no warning at all!"

It thrilled him when he heard his own voice. And all at once he felt a rush of good feeling, directed towards this man.

"Maybe you're right," said Pleasant. "But not so many would have stopped to think of that. And not so many,"

he added with a little touch of grimness, "would have taken a rifle off its bead against a pair of Colts!"

There was just a hint of a threat about that last speech, and it sent a chill through the blood of Fisher. Had he done rashly? Was this to be his last moment on earth? For he had heard much about the uncanny speed of this man with weapons, and before he could jerk the rifle back into position, perhaps a pair of leaden balls would crash through his brain!

No, Pleasant Jim, guiding his great gray horse with a touch of the knee alone, rode straight on and stretched out a hand.

"I want to know your name," said he.

How tall, how magnificent, how free he seemed as he came closer. And the stallion was hardly gray—it was silver, pointed with black, glorious beyond belief! No wonder that the marshal had said there was a difference between the mare and the horse. So a shadow of true awe for the first time in his life fell upon the heart of Lew Fisher.

"My name is Lew Fisher," he said, hardly finding his voice.

"You?" cried the other heartily. "You the nephew of Lewis Fisher? Well—I'm damned glad to know you!"

Much, much was implied in that statement. Lew could feel it, and the unspoken inference: "I know your uncle to be a rascal—but you're a cut above him!"

How dearly he wished that his self-satisfied uncle could have been at hand to hear that voice speaking!

"I brought up a letter for you from the marshal," said Lew Fisher. "Here it is."

He handed it over, and Pleasant remarked as he took it: "This here is friendly and neighborly of the marshal. In-

stead of sending men to shoot me, he sends men with letters." And he added rather warmly: "Tell the marshal, no matter what's in this letter, no matter whatever comes out of this manhunt, that I know that I got to be a crook, now, to the end of my days, but tell him that it's him that drove me into it. No, not his fault, and I understand that. But I wasn't trying to push any of the queer! I did a job for Long Tom. Well, that was wrong. But it was only carrying a message and the pay I got for it was counterfeit. All right, and while I'm in prison waiting a trial, I lose my farm." He set his teeth hard. "You can ask your uncle, Lew, how I happened to lose my farm! And after that I had to go wrong because there was no chance for me to go right! Say that to the marshal, will you?"

"I'll say that," replied Fisher. "But about you and your farm and my uncle—what's that?"

"I don't accuse no man behind his back," said Pleasant. "But you ask him, will you? And he'll put you right, maybe!"

They said good-by, for it obviously was not healthy soil for young Fisher to linger on.

Away he rode down the narrow cañon, and big Jim Pleasant opened the letter.

He read:

"Dear Pleasant,

"This is to let you know that I've just had a letter from some one printed large and rough, but I think that the hand that printed it belonged to Tom Rizdal. The letter tells me that on Thursday night I'll have a chance to find you alone in the house of Newberg. Because he and his brother will make it a point to be away from the place.

"Well, Pleasant, it's my job to get you if I can, and I'm surely going to try hard, but on the other hand I don't want to cut a man's throat in the dark. Take a look around you and see how you stand with the fellows who are calling themselves your friends. For my part, I hate a traitor worse than I do the devil.

"Yours with as much friendship as the law allows:

"SAM LEE."

He read this epistle back and forth twice, and then he dismounted in haste from his horse and touched a match to it. It reduced to a wisp of gray ash which rose like a bird and dissolved in the wind. When it was gone, he felt rather incredulous; it seemed utterly impossible that the Rizdals could wish to betray him; but far more impossible than that was it to believe that such a man as Sam Lee would descend to trickery.

He had a vague impulse to ride after young Fisher and tell him to carry the marshal his thanks, but he controlled that impulse, realizing that his work was strictly confined, for that moment, to the valley.

Then he remembered. The marshal had not asserted, definitely, that the hand which had offered to betray Pleasant was that of Tom Rizdal. He merely had thought so; though Pleasant shrewdly suspected that the "thought" of the marshal was apt to be more accurate than the "certainty" of most men. At any rate, it had led the man of the law to send this difficult warning, risking the life of the messenger in no uncertain manner.

The heart of Pleasant grew hot with a sort of stern gratitude. There was Fisher, too, who had carried the letter and had him helpless under the sights of his rifle. Well,

that act was almost enough to wipe out his sense of grudge concerning the uncle. It appeared that honesty and the world of honest men were worth something; and for the first time since his outlawry, Jim Pleasant felt as though he were living within a high and terrible wall.

What was the seeming freedom of the outlaw? It was rather an actual prison in which he lived, shut out from most of the good things of life and above all from the companionship of unexceptionable men!

In that mood he rode back to the shack. Thursday was the next day in the week. More than twenty-four hours remained during which he could discover whether or not Rizdal actually was false to him. And, at any rate, the marshal had given a sort of indefinite promise that the trap which was offered would not be used on him!

Cheered by that reflection, determined to key himself to the highest point, and make every shadow tell, he came in view of the Newberg house, and there was Sally walking moodily beside the creek.

She hardly looked up when he reined the horse beside her.

"Sally," he said, without dismounting, "if you'll do me a mighty big favor, tell me how wrapped up you are in Tom Rizdal?"

She did not answer, simply poking aimlessly at a stone with a walking stick which she had cut in the woods.

"I mean," went on he with some guile, "suppose that I heard that Rizdal was sick—could I hope that maybe supposing he should not get better, you'd be willing to look at me, afterwards?"

He thought that he was very subtle, but she merely raised her head and looked him in the eye.

"Jim," said she, "are you asking me what I'd think if you were to shoot Tom?"

It fairly made him blink, that direct assault.

"All right," said he, "I'm not talking murder, but if you're going to take it that way—"

He rode on, and knew that she was looking after him.

In a way, she was like the others. At least, he never quite could understand her. Men like Sam Lee were complicated enough, but in their honesty he could touch the bed-rock of their natures time and again. But Sally was different from other women, almost as Tom Rizdal was different from other men. He could not get her under the full finger of his comprehension, so to speak.

Doubly troubled and embittered, therefore, he put up the Leinster Gray in the corral, tossed in to it a forkful of hay to browse at if it chose, and then went slowly back towards the house.

The door was open; the wind had fallen to the softest breeze; and therefore, while he still was at a distance he could hear the voices inside.

Charlie Rizdal was saying: "I'll roll you for the guns, then!"

"Take you!" answered Long Tom.

And even the clinking and chipping of the dice were audible.

"They're yours," said Charlie Rizdal, with an oath. "Damn me if you don't have all the luck, and you need fine guns a lot less than I do."

"It ain't the gun that makes the dead shot. It's the talent, Charlie," said the older brother. "You wouldn't inherit his shooting even if you had his guns to work with!"

"Well, maybe not."

And it suddenly occurred to Pleasant Jim that this conversation had to do with him. They were shaking dice for the guns of a superior marksman—well, how many men in the world shot straighter than the Rizdals?

There was one he could think of, and that was himself!

So, softly, he slipped a little closer to the door and listened, standing still as a stone.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE two gamblers talked of other things. Sometimes there was only the rattle of the dice, for minutes at a time. They were inveterate gamblers, and their luck and skill were so very evenly matched that neither could be a very great loser to the other, in the long run.

"We've shaken for the other stuff," said Charlie. "Now how about the horse?"

"Hell, man," said Long Tom, "you might as well shake for his boots! He ain't dead yet, you know!"

Interesting conversation was this, under any circumstances, though doubtless he would not have paid any attention to it if it had not been for the warning letter of the sheriff which had served effectually to focus his suspicions. How many shadows float by us unnoticed in the ordinary course of events!

Now, his teeth set, Jim Pleasant felt that he was close to words which would betray the facts to him at last. He waited, his heart beating fast.

"I say, for the horse now. We'd fight about the gray afterwards!"

The gray!

"Shake them up, then. Poker horses, eh? Let it go!"

"There's only a pair of fives, Tom, but watch 'em grow!"

"I watch. Shake again."

"There you are. Beat three fives, old son."

"Easy! Here you are at one roll! A full house will about be enough, old kid."

"You got God Almighty's luck tucked up your sleeve, but the devil'll help me now. Come on, Tom. Pass me the box. Here's deuces and aces. Well, I'll fill. It ain't a thing to me to fill out two pairs. And *there* you are, son. A deuce full on aces, my lad. Talk to it, will you?"

"A horse on me. Here you go, then. Follow your hand. If I can't beat a measley pair of sixes I'm a goat. One flop is all that I needed, you see! And here's the third hand. Four little deuces standing in a row! I'm going to have the pony, Charlie, my boy."

"You yell when you got him in your pocket. Now, babies, hear your daddy talking. Be good—and—three fours give me a flying start, Tom. Turn cold, you sucker, because that horse is mine. Here it is—four fours. I'll ride the Leinster Gray, Tom, after all!"

There was all the proof that big Jim Pleasant could ask for. Certainly they considered him no better than a dead man, so that already they were gambling for his guns and his horse. He thought of the proud back of the Leinster Gray carrying one of them, and straightway his blood was boiling, so that a red mist covered his brain, and he could not think calmly.

He went to the door of the house and looked in on them, and though he cast no shadow, Long Tom suddenly sat erect in his chair; and then Charlie looked quickly askance and started violently.

"Hello, Jim," said he. "I thought—I thought that you were hunting to-day?"

"I am," said Pleasant grimly, and he walked across the room.

He felt the guilty, alarmed glances of the robbers crossing like swords behind his back as he went through the hall

door and then up the stairs to his room. There he made his pack quickly, still hot with rage and disgust.

He had barely finished it when he glanced out of the window. From the barn he saw Sally galloping off on her long-legged bay, and there was something about her handling of the horse as she went up the creek that made him certain that she would not come back at once.

After that, he threw his pack across his shoulders and hurried down the steps again, but halfway to the bottom, his brain cleared with a sudden touch of thoughtfulness.

If he came down into that room again, what would the two brothers do? If he walked across the room, with his pack on his back, would they let him go, unscathed? They had made up their minds to compass his death, and no doubt they would achieve their end if they could.

Half a dozen alternatives came to him. He might turn about and go back to his room—but if he did, they were sure to suspect something and be on the watch for his descent through the outer window. What could be better and easier than to spit a man with a bullet as he climbed down the wall of a house?

With that in mind, he went on.

Suppose that he stopped on the stairs to think things over? The instant that he paused, the pair would be prepared for him, knowing that there was suspicion in his mind.

In fact, he could see that through his blind anger he had walked into a quite efficient trap; and all he could imagine doing was to attempt to cut his way out of it, in spite of the expert guns of those two fighters.

As he came to the little hall at the foot of the steps, he saw that the door to the room was a trifle ajar. Was he being spied upon through the crack?

He unslung his pack and hurled it with all his might; it dashed the door open and flew on into the room and all the questions of Jim Pleasant were answered instantly by the crash of two guns.

He himself pitched to his face at the verge of the door, a revolver stretched out in either hand, and he could see the two—Charlie near the kitchen door, pale, his lips curled away from set teeth, a repeating rifle in his hands; Long Tom by the table, his feet spread a little and his head thrown back, like a true fighting man enjoying battle.

Pleasant tried two snap-shots in rapid succession. The first hit Charlie in the breast and he dropped the rifle, clutched the wound with both hands, and began to sink slowly to the floor. The second was aimed well enough, but it found the edge of the table and plowed a furrow straight across its top.

Long Tom, like a duelist of an older day, standing straight, high-headed, one arm behind him and the other extended stiffly with his Colt, was dropping bullet after bullet.

His first was aimed too high, almost as a matter of course, for a man lying on a floor presents an awkward target. His second clipped through the long hair on the back of Pleasant's head.

A swirl of smoke had formed before him, and having fired twice, he leaped to the side and shot again, but his own movement disturbed his aim. The third shot from Jim Pleasant toppled him to the floor.

Still he was not done; for as Pleasant scrambled to his feet, Long Tom spun himself over like a cat at play and caught up a revolver for a final shot.

Once more Pleasant fired, reluctantly, for this man was already down. He saw the head of Tom Rizdal jerk back as though struck heavily by a fist, and then the famous outlaw lay still. He would never rise again!

Charlie was groaning by the kitchen door, crawling slowly towards it. When he heard the step of the conqueror, he turned himself with a face made hideous by fear and stretched out his hands.

"Don't kill me, Jim," he moaned. "I'm a skunk. I know it. But don't kill me, Jim, for the sake of all the camps we've made together! I'm gunna die anyway! Lemme take my own time about it. Don't murder me, in the name of Jesus, Jim!"

"Lie down and stretch out," said Pleasant Jim. "I'm not going to murder you, though God knows what you've deserved. Lemme have a look at you!"

He slashed open the coat and shirt. It was a small purple-rimmed hole oozing blood and well down in the body below the heart. There was hardly one chance in five that it had not found a fatal spot; the terrible, spasmodic groans of the injured man seemed each one to be giving flight to his soul.

Pleasant Jim stepped into the kitchen and there he found the three members of the family cowering. He told them there was no danger, but to come back into the other room and take care of a badly hurt man.

Dumbly they came, and the woman screamed as she reached the door. Her husband, however, was made of sterner stuff and was instantly on his knees beside Charlie Rizdal, barking orders for bandages and hot water.

Then, stooping and fumbling in the coat pocket of the wounded man, Pleasant pulled out the wallet, fat and hard

with treasure. Charlie Rizdal opened his glazing eyes and acknowledged the transfer with a ghastly smile.

"It'll do me no good in hell, where I'm going," said he. "Take it and welcome! Ride hard, Pleasant, and I wish you luck. You been squarer to me than I've deserved."

Upon the table, Pleasant counted out two thousand dollars.

He said to the busy family:

"I'm leaving. And here's two thousand. One thousand for you for taking care of Rizdal. The second thousand is for Charlie if he gets well enough to ride, ever. Mind you, if ever I hear that you've short-changed him, I'm coming back here to settle 'with you for it.'"

He stepped to Long Tom and from his pockets he took the two big shares which the chief had apportioned to himself. Then he picked up his pack and waved good-by from the door. The room was still streaked with pungent smoke from the burned powder. The dead eyes of Long Tom smiled horribly and vacantly up to him near by. And yonder was a group working frantically over Charlie Rizdal to the accompaniment of his groans.

It was very easy to paint a different scene—his own dead body lying at the foot of the stairs, and the two brothers, gun in hand, touching him to make sure that life was gone.

So he backed from the house, a gun still hanging naked in his hand. For who could tell what wild thought might come to the man or the boy who remained in the place? One well-placed shot would make them the masters of more than half a million dollars!

However, they had seen enough of his handiwork on that day and required to see no more.

He reached the corral unhindered, and saddled the gray in haste, suddenly frantic to get away from that neighborhood of death. But, for all his haste, he could not help noticing how his pack was punctured by two holes—

The first shots of the Rizdals had been well-aimed indeed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HE had no thought of working out a trail problem behind him to baffle pursuit, when the marshal and his men came up; his mind was too busy with other matters, and he simply drifted straight on towards the higher mountains.

He had no sense of victory or of elation. For the treasure which was now in his hands he had no more regard than for a handful of dead leaves. Over eight hundred thousand dollars had been taken from the bank and divided among six persons. Of the six, two were in prison and probably would spend the rest of their better years behind the bars. Two lay dead, or dying, stripped of their loot. One was a woman. And she never would forgive him for the slaying of her accepted lover.

No, Sally was taken out of his life forever!

What utter loneliness came to Pleasant Jim then as he worked his way up a narrow ravine and listened to the distant, booming voice of a waterfall, no man could guess. He would have given much, he thought, even to have the Rizardals, with murder in their hearts, riding one on either side of him. But he was left alone.

All had been stripped from him in these last few months. He had given up his farm and the horses whose blood was almost as dear to him as his own. He had given up the friendship of all law-abiding men and women. He had given up the protection of his country. He had given up all the old ambitions which had ruled his life. And, above all, he had given up Sally.

A grim man was Jim Pleasant on this day, thinking of all that had chanced. And a dreadful sense of guilt oppressed him, seeing that with his own hand he had shot down two members of the band which had worked so long with him!

For all that he had sacrificed, he had gained what? Money, money, money! And what could he do with the money? It would not buy him friends, or home, or the old hopes, or the woman he loved. It was less than nothing, in fact.

Moreover, it was a deadly danger. Of six, four were gone to death or prison or long sickness. One was a girl wandering through the hills.

And now what would he do?

Well, he could ride on until the dusk, and then camp and shoot a supper for himself and cook it. Each day must be sufficient unto itself!

He resigned himself as well as he could. Henceforth, who could tell for how long, he must live as the beasts live! So he worked on until the dusk, and then he made camp.

He left the gray in a small bit of grazing land, enclosed by brush. He himself ate freshly shot rabbit, broiled over a small fire, and he slept in a thicket, also, made miserable by mosquitoes and small flies which bit with the strength of snakes.

In the morning, early, he was on his way to take advantage of the fresh time of the day; all through the middle watch of the day he camped again and let the horse graze, and in the evening he came with the Leinster Gray down into a small hollow.

It was dimly starred with many lights, and Pleasant Jim rode hungrily towards them, for his very heart was empty

and aching for the sound of the voices of honest men, freed from the catlike purr or the doglike snarl of the criminal's talk. Boldly he rode, knowing that danger was thickening around him, but caring not at all.

Screened behind a hedge of poplars, he saw the faintly illumined forms of four children playing before a house and on the lighted veranda of the house the parents sat. It was a weary, gray woman, and a man with shirt open at the throat, bared, hairy arms, smoking a pipe. He was some common laborer. And yet his lot seemed to Pleasant Jim a vastly enviable one.

He went on a little farther and came to a shack in which the light seemed as small as the house in which it glowed. One small, bent old man sat in the doorway; and Pleasant Jim rode boldly up to him.

"I smell ham, father," said he. "Got any left to fry for me?"

"Sure, I have," said the other. "Get down and rest your feet, son. I suppose that you ain't got a regular hotel price on you, eh?"

And he laughed with a sort of feeble good nature. But the sound was delicious to Pleasant Jim. After this one evening, how far and long he might have to ride before he would be allowed to mingle with human beings again—except such as he persuaded at the end of a revolver!

"Take your pony around to the shed," said the host, "and chuck him in a feed of barley. You'll find some at the bottom of the box, I reckon!"

Gladly Pleasant obeyed, and by the time he had finished grooming the Leinster Gray, a smoking supper was waiting for him in the little house.

The old man sat near by, squinting through his heavy glasses.

"You look sort of familiar to me," he said. "You ain't Dean Tucker's boy come home, are you?"

"No. I'm just riding through. I hear that there's work up the valley."

"At the Y Bar, maybe you mean?"

"Yes, that's what I was told."

"Sure, you can find work there."

"What's in the paper, father?"

"Why, there ain't much except about Pleasant."

Pleasant Jim gritted his teeth on his fork.

"Ye-ah?" he queried. "What's he done now?"

"Him? Why, you wouldn't believe it."

"Go on and tell me. He's the bank robber, ain't he?"

"Yep. Jim Pleasant. Gunman and robber and what not. Counterfeiter. All-around bad one. Nacheral crook. Used to pick up coin hunting heads. Well, what good would you expect in that sort of a chap?"

"I dunno," said Pleasant thoughtfully. "I dunno! I sort of thought that that game wasn't the best in the world. Still, a man has to work for what he gets in it!"

"It takes a thief to catch a thief," said the old man with much positiveness, "and it takes a murderer to kill a murderer. I got no use for no gunfighter, no matter whether he's holding up the law or breaking it down. The same tar is on all of 'em, I tell you!"

"Maybe. But what's Pleasant done now? Escaped again?"

"He's made fools of 'em all. He's made fools of 'em complete! I laughed when I heard what he done to Sam Lee. Sam is a wise man and a tolerable good one, but he

was made a fool of by Pleasant. It'll be some time before they catch that lad. Well, you ask me what he's done lately?"

"Yes."

"You guess, will you?"

"Busted open another bank?"

"It's all in the paper, here," said the old fellow; "here you are: 'The celebrated desperado, James Pleasant, either in a drunken brawl, or else determined to rob his partners in crime, yesterday according to recent report shot down in single battle both of the Rizdal brothers. Thomas Rizdal, known as Long Tom, is dead, with two bullets through his body; and Charles Rizdal is now lying, dangerously wounded, in the hands of Marshal Sam Lee, who arrived at the scene of bloodshed with his posse shortly after the shooting affair. Pleasant has fled towards the mountains; the woman who was with the outlaws also has disappeared and is believed to have gone with Pleasant.'

"'According to a statement made by Charles Rizdal, he and his brother were playing a friendly game of cards when Pleasant treacherously attacked them—'"

"He lied!" cried Jim Pleasant.

"Hello! What makes you think so?"

"I know something about that man. He wouldn't take an unfair advantage!"

"Maybe you're right," said the old man. "There is folks that have a mighty fine sense of honor, and they're mighty particular how they do their murders! Lemme give you some more coffee!"

"I've had enough," exclaimed Pleasant, starting to his feet. "I have to be going on. Thanks for the feed—and how much is it?"

"Aw, nothing," said the other. "It's a pleasure to fill a hungry man's belly, and it done me good to see you eating."

"Take this, then," said Pleasant, and he held out a ten dollar bill.

The other took it, scrutinized it carefully on either side and then passed it back.

"Thanks," said he, and shook his head.

"Why not?" asked Pleasant.

"I don't want your money, stranger."

"You don't! Dad, you can't afford to be throwing away your chuck on every stranger that comes along. You take that and shove it into your jeans!"

"Well," replied the old fellow, "I'd sort of like to do it, at that. I ain't the richest man in the world," he laughed, "but still I can't take your money, friend."

"Will you tell me why my money is worse than any other man's in the valley?" asked Pleasant.

"I'll tell you why, if you won't take it hard. There's blood on your money, friend!"

"Blood?" cried Pleasant, aghast. And he stared at the slip of paper curiously. Certainly it was not altogether fresh, but there was no stain that even faintly resembled blood.

Then, with a start and a shock, he understood what was meant.

The old man stood in the shadows of the corner, his hand resting on a shotgun—not as one ready to give offense, but as one standing resolutely on his rights.

"You're right!" cried Pleasant bitterly. "You're all correct. There's blood on every damned cent of it, and God help my miserable soul!"

And he strode on out of the doorway and found his horse and rode in blind haste towards the cold heights of the distant mountains. They were barren and stark, to be sure, but they were less dangerous and less cruel than the tongues of men!

CHAPTER XXXIX

FOR a week he marched steadily, taking fine care of the Leinster Gray, which stood up like iron under the punishing work of the journey. All that time he saw no human face, and so he found himself again on the edge of the lofty tableland overlooking Fisher Valley. And there was an ache of sorrow in his heart as he looked down upon the trail up which he and Sally had ridden so long ago. He smiled faintly as he remembered that there had been greater trouble in his heart than the mere fear of danger. He had been in love, and like a perfect dolt, he had not known it. For had he known, he swore to himself that he would have found some way to persuade her in time.

Now she was riding somewhere through the dark of the valleys, hunted like him, and carrying in her heart a great load of hatred for the slayer of Long Tom Rizdal.

In nothing had he done well. All things seemed to him a blank except for the dead days when he had worked with his horses, and that one glorious time of struggle and labor when he had carried Sally through the lines of the law.

When he was through with his camp chores, he sat and dreamed not of the future but of the past, for hope was gone from him; and every small moment of the time with Sally was traced and retraced until the lines were made thick and strong indeed.

Danger itself had become a small thing to him. He had turned hard. From the bright steel of this new nature of his, the face of peril seemed to slip away; it had no cutting

edge against him. Only two days before he had wound through the Cameron Pass despite its guards set to catch him. Men talked much of this and of his other deeds, but he regarded them not. There was no past, there was no future to him. There was only the dreadful sense of loss. And as for what was to come, he would meet it a step at a time and never walk far afield in his speculations.

But, as he sat with his cigarette on the edge of a rock that hung above the valley wall, he heard a slight sound as of a cracked twig underfoot, in the brush behind him. It was not enough to have reached the ear of an ordinary man. Certainly there was nothing suspicious about it, but Pleasant heard it with a sudden brightening of his mind. He became alert, and almost anxious for it to turn into an actual danger.

He did not move. He went on calmly smoking, with his head apparently directed down towards the valley lights of the evening, but turned enough to scan, from the tail of his eye, the brush wall behind him.

And presently he saw the tops of the bush bending, slowly, softly, noiselessly, pressed to either side in such a manner as the wind could not possibly have managed it.

It was enough for him.

He jerked off his boots and in his stockinged feet he slipped back to the verge of the brush and waited. The faintest of rustlings came towards him. And suddenly a half-mad notion came to Pleasant to meet this danger with his bare hands.

Somewhere from an eminence above this stalker had marked him down and determined to work nearer for a point-blank shot that would send Pleasant Jim sliding from the rock and toppling with loose arms and legs through the void and down into the valley beneath!

With a cruel satisfaction, Pleasant considered this, and then he slipped his revolvers into their clips beneath his arm-pits.

The noise came a little closer; prying eyes might almost look out, now, and discover him crouched.

Then he hurled himself forward. One crash drove him diving through the bushes; a gun flashed and roared in his face; and then the weight of his shoulder struck down the stalker and stretched him on the ground.

Pleasant whirled like a tiger, fumbled for and found the hands of his victim, and dragged him out into the open.

"You damn head-hunter!" said he. "I'm gunna pitch you over the cliff here and let your bones rot underneath, my friend!"

A staggering voice answered him: "Do and be damned! I got no luck, or else you got ears a hundred feet away from you!"

"Hello!" said Pleasant. "Wait a minute—"

He brought his face close to the face of his prisoner.

"Fisher!" he exclaimed.

"It's me," said Lew Fisher bitterly. "A little turn of luck—and I'd have turned you into pulp, you swine. Go on and finish me, now. You're too damn strong for me!"

To prove his own words, he threw himself frantically back, but the hands which held his were remorselessly powerful. He could not dislodge that grip.

"All right," said young Fisher. "Go on and turn the trick. I ain't going to holler!"

"Where's Sam Lee?"

"None of your damn business."

"Ain't he coming right up behind you?"

"D'you think I'd squeal if he was?"

Jim Pleasant whistled.

"All right! All right!" said he. "Don't lose your shirt about it. But you're game, kid. You're dead game!"

"D'you think so?" said the boy, eagerly.

"I know it. Now, Fisher, I got to polish you off, because I'm afraid to leave you loose on my trail. Sam Lee and the rest—let them go. But you—you've trailed me down twice. The third time it would be me that was done for!"

"By God, I think it would!"

"Now, Fisher, you tell me what I can do for you, and what sort of a message you want to send to your uncle, say. Or is there a girl, somewheres?"

"Aw, let the old boy rot; and I never give a damn about the women. I ain't that kind. Only—Pleasant—"

He seemed half choked with emotion.

"Yes?"

"Would you do one thing for me?"

"Sure I would."

"Now, look here. Me being dead, it wouldn't hurt you none to do it. But write down and mail to some newspaper that you was afraid of me—just like you said to me—not of Sam Lee and the rest, but only of me."

"I'll do it."

"Will you? My God, that'll make me die a happy man. That'll show people that I was something more than a damn bank clerk and the nephew of crooked Lewis Fisher."

"Crooked?"

"Sure. A snake has got a bigger soul than him!"

"You wouldn't run the bank the way he does, maybe?"

"If I lived to have it? No, damned if I would. But what's the use of talking like that? What are you doing?"

You don't have to tie my hands. I'll take the jump myself and never yip."

But Pleasant Jim secured his hands firmly and then searched him and removed a veritable small armory of weapons.

"Where's your horse?" he asked.

"What's that to you, Big Boy?"

"I ask you, where's your horse?"

"Well, it'll be no use to me, and he's a jim-dandy. Back of the hummock, there. Favor him a little; he's got a tender mouth."

"You like horses, son?"

"Me? What fool doesn't? I mean, except Uncle Lewis! He likes nothing but cash."

"You know horses, too?"

"Not a bit, hardly. But some day I will. I mean, I would have!"

"Son," said Pleasant, "turn around and start for your horse."

"What's the idea?"

"Do what I tell you!"

The boy turned obediently, swallowing his wonder, and they went slowly back around the edge of the brush. A soft whistle brought the Leinster Gray glimmering towards them, beautiful beyond belief even in that soft, dim light.

"They'll never catch you—not with your pair of ears and that horse," said the boy.

Behind the hummock they came to the waiting pony, and Pleasant helped the lad to mount him.

"You left Sam Lee and came on by yourself?"

"Yes."

"How come?"

"Why should I split up a little reputation with six others?"

"Besides, you were able to find me once."

"Yes, and I found you again—except that you found me first!" He swore softly. "I should have tried the long-range shot," said he, "but in the half light—I wasn't quite sure of myself. And I wanted to make sure. Pleasant, how could you possibly have heard me? I didn't make a sound coming through the bush."

"Only one," admitted Pleasant. "You did a good job. But then, I have to live by my eyes and ears, and that makes a difference."

"Aye, it does. Now what?"

But Pleasant had swung into the saddle.

"Never mind asking questions. You ride straight ahead and turn when I tell you to turn."

"I'll do it. Only—I'd like to have the business over with. Mind you, I'm not whining, though. Damned if I'm whining, Pleasant!"

Jim Pleasant laughed a little. His heart was freeing itself of a peculiar pain. There was something about this strange youth that delighted him.

"Suppose that I don't murder you, Lew?"

There was a long silence. The horses went slowly ahead down the trail, the stirrup leathers creaking.

"What d'you mean by saying that?" asked the boy in his sharp, ugly voice.

"Why, kid, I never shot a man in cold blood in my life!"

And he added savagely: "No matter what Charlie Rizdal said!"

"Aw, Charlie's a hound dog," said the boy with unutter-

able scorn. "Sam Lee says so. Sam ain't on your trail any longer, you know!"

"The devil he isn't!"

"No, he says that the main part of his work you've already done for him. The killing of Tom Rizdal, I mean."

CHAPTER XL

THUS a new idea was presented to Pleasant Jim, and one which he did not greatly relish; and Lew Fisher developed the theme as he rode on down the trail, his hands tied in front of him, but free enough to use the reins of his pony.

"It was a great stroke that the old marshal put in," said Lew. "I mean, sending you word that would get you into trouble with the two Rizdals. Look how it worked! What good was the catching of Tom? He'd been caught before but never held. Now he's dead, and that's a little different. Then there's Charlie. Well, Charlie is caught and it'll be queer if Charlie ever gets away again. They've got enough against him to hang him ten times over, and this time he'll hang, all right, because he's used up all of his good luck. A fellow can't go on forever like that—slipping away from trouble, I mean. He may dodge for a while, but at last they get him. And what's the use of all of his good time, if he's got to pay for it with a rope around his neck in the finish? That's what I heard Charlie Rizdal say. He ought to know!"

The boy chuckled grimly, and big Pleasant grew more and more serious. For, after all, this was a fairly accurate description of his own position in life, and beyond doubt he would come to the same evil end.

All that night they worked down from the edge of the plateau and into Fisher Valley; and by the morning they were well up towards the town. There Pleasant made camp, tying himself to the youngster as he lay down to sleep,

though Lew Fisher said with his chuckle: "What's the good, Jim? Am I gunna be crazy enough to tackle you with my bare hands?"

However, he took no chances; a great and forlorn hope was forming in his mind and he meant to stake everything upon a strange cast of the dice.

After that, if all went well, the way would be cleared for him to reach into the darkness of the unknown criminal world and try to find Sally.

So he went to sleep and dreamed all night that he was struggling against a dreadful monster of many heads; and as fast as he throttled one, other heads appeared and fastened their teeth in him.

In this manner, therefore, big Pleasant slept through the middle of the day.

Before dusk, hungry and tired, he was on the way again with Lew Fisher, pressing recklessly ahead through the woods, risking much.

"You've been seen about six times," said Lew, shortly after sunset. "D'you know that you've been spotted, Pleasant?"

"They see the gray and me on it," answered Pleasant. "But they'll never expect to see me riding along like this, in this direction, and at this time of day. And folks only see what they want to see."

The boy nodded with admiration.

"Where are you going, Jim?"

"Some place you've been before. Wait and see."

They cast a slight circle around the town and so came out in the thick of the dusk above Fisher Falls and close to the residence of Lewis Fisher himself.

The house of that celebrated man was retired a little from

the rest of the town; just as his reputation was greater than that of any other in the valley, so his home was more largely planned and built. He had surrounded an extent of hills and woods with a strong stone wall, and behind the wall transplanted trees had now grown up into a veritable jungle. Passing by the huge gate of wrought iron, one had a swift glimpse of the imposing façade of his house on the distant hill, and many wondered that the owner of so great a mansion should deign to remain in so small a community. In one thought, however, Lewis Fisher agreed with Cæsar.

As the two riders came near this house, Pleasant dismounted and brought the horses into a thick grove and secured them there. After that he found an easily climbed section of the wall, went up himself, and helped Lew Fisher after him. This done, he headed straight across the grounds towards the distant house.

"You know, Pleasant," said the boy cheerfully, "that I could let out a yell and have half a hundred people swarming on top of you in no time!"

"You know, son," answered Pleasant with almost equal good nature, "that I could send a bullet into you or cut your throat before the help came."

"You wouldn't do it," said the boy with a perfect confidence. "Sam Lee said that you'd never do a murder; and that you never would, unless you were driven into a corner! Sam says a good many fine things about you, old timer."

"Sam hates my heart," answered Pleasant bitterly. "It was Sam Lee that dragged me into hell, and one of these days Sam and me are going to fight it out!"

They had crossed an open meadow; now they passed through a grove of trembling poplars and went on under the very shadow of the house.

They knew Mr. Fisher was close before they laid eyes on him, for they heard his loud voice from the side veranda. Crouched in the brush, they stole closer, and it seemed to Pleasant that the boy put as much zest and care into this maneuver as did he himself.

They could see Fisher at last, and the red round point of light which was his cigar. He was calling out servants from his house, one at a time, and dressing them down in the most severe manner.

"He's sore as a goat!" whispered young Lew to his captor in the darkness. "There's poor Johnson. He'll catch hell worse than all the rest."

Johnson was the secretary-clerk-stenographer who performed like a slave for the banker; and like a slave he was lashed by the words of the elder Fisher now—until a sudden change came in the voice of the banker.

"Johnson," he said, "what's the news about the boy?"

"About your nephew? There's no news except bad news. The marshal has come in—and your nephew is not with him!"

Utter silence greeted that remark, and then: "What report did Sam Lee send?" asked Fisher in a shaken voice.

"He sent in word, it's said, that your nephew went off by himself and swore that he never would come back unless he brought Jim Pleasant with him."

"The fool!" shouted Fisher, Senior. "The jackass! He wants to make the world think that he's a hero—and he's only a baby—a rabbit—and yet—"

He checked himself again.

"Johnson," he said at last, "the lad is a hero. And I never have appreciated him! Go down to the town, make the telegraph hum. Find out more word about him!"

Johnson hastily retreated, and young Lew touched the arm of his companion in the darkness.

"That beats me," said he. "That sure beats me, Jim! I think maybe he's fond of me, and not using me because he simply hasn't any other heir!"

"Keep before me," said Pleasant, and added, as they stood up: "Walk up to the veranda and warn him in a quiet voice that he mustn't shout or do anything to attract attention."

So they approached the veranda, and as they drew nearer, they heard Fisher call out briskly: "You there, Tucker? That you and Bliss?"

They stepped still closer.

"What the devil—" began the banker as if in alarm, and stood up.

"Uncle Lewis," said the warning voice of his nephew, "don't make a noise. Be quiet."

"Merciful God," breathed the man of money. "Are you there, Lew? Are you there, and safe?"

"Softer, softer!" said Lew Fisher. "I'm here, but I'm a prisoner."

"To whom?"

"To Jim Pleasant here beside me."

They had come up quite close, by this time, and Lewis Fisher as he heard the name cried out in a stifled voice and stumbled back.

"Keep close and keep still," said Jim Pleasant. "I haven't come here to shoot you."

The alarm of the older man for himself was instantly swallowed in concern for his nephew.

"You've been hurt, lad! You've been shot down and you're bleeding to death, I know!" murmured Fisher. "Otherwise, how could he ever have taken you?"

"He took me the way a tiger takes a goat—with his hands. He's brought me here and he wants to talk to you."

Fisher spread out his legs. Instantly he was the business man striking a bargain.

"Leave the boy here with me, unharmed in any particular," said he, "and I'll guarantee not to turn in alarm on you. Do you hear?"

"I hear."

"But if not, I call one word and the alarm goes out and the place will be surrounded and you will be—"

"Fisher, I walked through a Fisher Falls alarm one night. Now I have a horse to get through it. Besides, you don't understand. I'm not in your net. You're in mine. My gun is in my hand. I have you covered from the hip. Are you talking alarms to me, Fisher?"

The banker said quickly: "Very well. You have a certain business sense, my lad. Now what is your point of view?"

"That I have the drop on you."

"I suppose that you have, in a way, owing to the idiocy of my nephew in letting himself be captured."

"Friend," said Pleasant coldly, "there have been some hard men and some rough men on my trail lately, as you may know. But there's never a one of them that gave me as much to worry about as your nephew."

"Is it true?" cried Fisher, Senior, in delight. "By heavens, Lew, I'm proud of you. There's been a great deal about you that I never understood or knew about!"

"There's been a great deal of you," replied Pleasant, "that your nephew never knew. I'm going to tell him now. Lew, listen to the yarn of how I went bad. I was working to clear away a mortgage on my little farm; I nearly had turned the trick by working like a dog on the place, taking

my luck and making my luck, and even by getting blood money from the law. Then I met Long Tom and he offered me a thousand for what looked like an easy thing to do. I did the job. I sent in the thousand to the bank—and your uncle, here, found out that the money was counterfeit. Right there he made up his mind. He decided that here was his chance to get for next to nothing the farm that—”

“You lie!” panted Lewis Fisher.

“Wait a minute,” said Jim Pleasant. “I was jailed for passing counterfeit; while I was in jail your uncle foreclosed on me when he knew that I was helpless, and he scared out the other bidders at the auction, so that he got everything on the place for twenty-five hundred. And there you are! I was cleaned out of my life’s work. What I did then was to break jail, and the next thing I did was to crack open a bank. Notice, that it was Lewis Fisher’s bank. I felt that that sort of squared things between us, in a way. Now I’m hounded across the world and some day I’ll have to start killing to avoid being killed. Part of the fault is mine. I never should have taken a job from a known crook like Long Tom. I can see that. But who was it that put the slide under me and shot me down into hell? Why, your uncle, there!”

“Every criminal tries to sneak the blame on the shoulders of another!”

“Uncle Lewis,” said the boy in a fury of disgust and scorn, “he’s told the truth!”

“You impertinent young scoundrel!” cried the banker. “Are you daring to dispute what I—”

“Quit it,” said the boy curtly. “I’m not what I used to be, and I don’t swallow that sort of talk from you any longer.

I've done a man's job once; and I'll never go back to boy's work again. That's flat!"

Lewis Fisher was silent, amazed and bewildered.

"Are you daring to throw away—" he began.

And the boy said fiercely: "Hell, Uncle Lewis, what am I throwing away? The life of a bat for the life of a man! D'you think there's much to hesitate over in that choice?"

And again Lewis Fisher was silent.

His nephew added suddenly: "I've talked pretty hard to you. Confound it, Uncle Lewis, I mean to talk better than that. You've been mighty kind to me in a million ways. Only—maybe you understand that everything hasn't been so very easy for me! I'd like to be your nephew and your friend; but I'm never again going to be your slave!"

This declaration of independence caught Mr. Fisher behind the knees, apparently; for suddenly his legs bowed and he sat down heavily in his chair, with a great creak of wickerwork.

"So that's the end of years of nurture and care and forethought for your sake, young man?" he asked savagely. "That's the end of it all?"

"Or maybe it's the beginning," broke in Jim Pleasant. "D'you want a soft-head or a man to take your place when you die?"

He added: "Now we'll get down to *my* business. Fisher, you can tell me what stands between me and a chance to get back inside the law?"

CHAPTER XLI

THE banker seemed to take enjoyment in this sudden turn of the conversation, for he turned the words slowly over his tongue.

"What keeps you outside the law? Only a few little things, my friend Pleasant! You've passed counterfeit money, in the first place, and in the second place you've broken jail. In the third place, you've taken a million dollars from my bank. I think those are three counts. Beyond this, you've done little things such as shooting down men in the act of enforcing the law against you—but I suppose that hardly counts!"

"Very well," said Pleasant. "I've got three big counts against me. Start with the last first. It wasn't a million."

"It was nearly nine hundred thousand."

"You got a quarter of that back at once."

"A third of it," said the banker.

"How is that?"

"You don't know the story of the satchel of money left on my doorstep?"

"Sally!" cried Jim Pleasant suddenly. "She's turned in her share!"

"An admirable young woman—if it was she," said the banker. "And if you could let her know—I'd arrange to have all danger of arrest removed from her. Sam Lee says that it can be done. We're above persecuting women, in this part of the country," continued Fisher nobly.

"You're still out five-eighths of the money you lost."

"Yes."

"Now, Fisher, suppose that I lay down that money—more than half a million—here on the veranda at your feet?"

Mr. Fisher rose, electrified, to his feet.

"Good God!" he breathed. "That ain't possible!"

"What would you pay for that, Fisher?"

"Pay? I'd have the indictment quashed! I'd—I'd arrange everything! You would have to have no fear, my friend! As for the passing of a thousand dollars counterfeit—Sam Lee is a sensible man. We could see to it that he kept his hands off you. As for the men who were injured in trying to stop your escape—a little money judiciously spent on their families—well, everything could be arranged. Pleasant, do you mean what you say?"

"I mean that I'll come back," said Jim Pleasant, "if I can step in right where I stepped out. I stepped out from a farm stocked with fine horseflesh. I want that farm back and all the horses, Mr. Fisher!"

Lewis Fisher groaned. That little farm had become the very apple of his eye.

"A business transaction—" he began.

"I'm offering you half a million," said Pleasant.

"Of my own money!"

"For a thing you stole. Stolen fruit for stolen cash, my friend!"

"I'll see you damned first, Pleasant! It—it's not business!"

"Is that final?"

"Absolutely."

"Then good-by."

He turned briskly away, taking young Fisher by the arm.

"Hold on," said the banker. "Do you take Lew with you? Do you dare to—"

"D'you think that I'll take to the trail and leave this here young bloodhound to follow me again?"

"Pay down the money and set Lew free," said Fisher suddenly. "I'll give you what you want."

"What's your security?" asked Lew Fisher curiously.

"You are," replied the outlaw. "If he breaks his word to me, he'll be less than a cur in your eyes, and he knows it. Besides, if he double-crosses me, I'll kill him if I die trying!"

The banker was breathing hard, rubbing his handkerchief repeatedly across his forehead.

"I'll leave the money with you," said Pleasant. "I'll leave your nephew with you, too. If everything can't be arranged the way I want—all the law-dogs called off and the farm given back to me—I expect that half million to come back. Is that straight?"

There was a pause, and then Lewis Fisher groaned.

"That's straight!" said he.

"You're a witness, Lew?" asked the outlaw.

"I'm a witness to every word, Jim. Why, if Uncle Lewis even dreamed of double-crossing you after you've played so white with me, I'd write him up in the newspapers myself!"

"Good night."

"How'll we keep in touch with you?"

"I'll be not far from town. If you want me, send Lew up the valley to The Three Sisters. He can send a smoke signal by day or a fire signal by night, and I'll not be far away."

So he turned from them and crossing the ground rapidly, climbed the wall, found the Leinster Gray, and rode off through the night.

CHAPTER XLII

THE mental reaction of the banker was instant and powerful.

"Now I've got the cash—where's Sam Lee to throw this scoundrel of an outlaw into prison? Send for Sam Lee!"

"Send for him, then," said young Lew. "I'll ride down to The Three Sisters and warn poor Pleasant."

"You! Lew, you've lost your head! You're out of your wits!"

"Or else send for Sam Lee," said the boy firmly, "and ask him how we possibly can save Pleasant from jail."

His uncle listened to this speech in the deepest amazement, but suddenly he nodded in acquiescence.

"Get Sam Lee!"

They got the marshal.

He rode up on a tough mustang and came cheerfully to the banker that morning.

"I want to talk about Jim Pleasant," said Fisher.

"Everybody does," answered Sam, with a grin.

"Look at this!"

"More bank loot," said the marshal, glancing at the heap.

"All that I've lost now," said Lewis Fisher, "is a good deal of sleep, and a paltry few thousands in hard cash that was spent along the way. Now, marshal, this money is left with me in trust. If Pleasant can be kept out of jail, it's mine. If not, it has to go back to him. You see where I stand?"

"Did Pleasant do that?" murmured the marshal, a glint

of fire in his eyes. "Did he dare to ride down to Fisher Falls again? By God, that man has nerve!"

"He brought down my nephew," said the banker. "Lew was head-hunting. Pleasant caught him and brought him down, and turned him over to me along with the money. What do you say, Sam Lee?"

Sam Lee shook his head.

"I've heard a good deal about bank robberies," said he. "And I've never heard of a neater one than this, and damn few bigger ones. Everything worked off well. They got away with the bigger part of a million; and most of them broke through my hands. Well—what happens? They all go crash, except two. Somewhere there's the girl. And somewhere there's this Jim Pleasant. But all of the money comes back to Mr. Lewis Fisher like homing pigeons. How do you make that out, sir?"

"Who killed the Rizdals?" asked Fisher.

The marshal nodded.

"It was Pleasant," said he. "He's done more work for me than my whole posse of hand-picked gun-fighters! But as long as Jim Pleasant is free to get away with this job, I'm done for. People will laugh at me. I've failed a good many times. But I've never been made a fool of before!"

"Listen to me," said Lewis Fisher. "I don't want to pay the price for my own money. I'd be glad enough if you could rake in Pleasant and put him behind steel bars that he couldn't cut through. But I'll tell you what, my friend, you'll never catch Jim Pleasant without causing a lot of brave men to die. He's proved what he can do in a pinch!"

"Let him prove it again," said the marshal savagely. "I've said my last word about him!"

With that, he hurried down the steps and away from the

house, with Lewis Fisher vainly following and protesting that this decision was costing him half a million.

Sam Lee with a sort of guilty haste mounted his horse and rushed back to the town and to his own little private office, which had been built to the side with a separate entrance upon the lane that wound sinuously from one main street to another. A huge and overarching tree kept the little room fairly cool.

There the marshal sat down, his jaw set and his eyes keen, like one about to fight a battle. And a battle, surely, soon would come. His tried and trusted trailers were at work running down the traces of Jim Pleasant. And when they located their quarry—

There was a knock at the door to the lane.

"Hello," said the marshal. "Come in!"

"I'll talk to you through the door," said the voice of a girl.

"You will?" exclaimed the marshal.

"Yes. Stay where you are. I simply want to have a little chat with you."

"Who are you?"

"My name doesn't matter, to begin with. Later I can tell you."

"Go on," said the marshal. "What have you got to say?"

But as he spoke, he glided softly, softly forward, and then seized the handle of the door with a tremendous wrench to tear it open.

He almost broke his wrists, but he did not budge the door.

"I knew that you'd try that," said the girl's voice, without triumph. "So I tied the door on this side. More than that, I can watch you through a bit of a crack, Sam Lee, and if you try to slip around outside your office, I'll just

climb into the saddle on my horse which is standing here, and I'll be off among the trees before you can possibly get a shot at me."

"I don't shoot at women," said the marshal a little in anger.

"Maybe you don't," said the girl. "And I'd like to think that you don't, of course. But I haven't come here to talk about women. I've come to talk about a man."

"Ah," said the marshal, "you've got a sweetheart in trouble through me. Is that it? And you've come to beg him off? Is that the idea? Or maybe to find out what my price may be? Lemme tell you, honey, that I got no price, and that I never let no man off once the law has fixed on him for wrong-doing!"

"I'm talking about Jim Pleasant," said the girl.

"By the Eternal God!" groaned the marshal. "Has the whole world gone nutty about that man? What about him? And who are you?"

"I want to know what you'll take to let Pleasant go free."

"You, too! Why," said the marshal, "I wouldn't take ten billion dollars!"

"Because men would say that you'd failed?"

"Yes."

"You're honest. But look here—suppose that we arrange a little exchange. Jim Pleasant is pretty well known, but in his place I'll give you a much worse criminal than Pleasant."

"That's interesting," said the marshal. "Who might the criminal be, that's done more than Jim Pleasant? Will you tell me that?"

"I have," said the voice of the girl.

"You? A woman?"

"Yes, and a young one."

"By heavens!" said the marshal. "You'd give yourself up for the sake of Pleasant?"

"Yes."

"And who are you?"

"I'm Sally."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE marshal clung to the door for a moment, bewildered.

"Untie the door," he said at last. "I give you my word I'll not try to make an arrest unless you give me the word. I want to talk this over."

A slash of a knife—the door sagged open—and Sally stood before him, her pretty face shadowed by a wide-brimmed sombrero.

"Nothing but nerve! Nothing but nerve!" said the marshal, inviting her towards a chair. "You've rode in right through Fisher Falls, and nobody recognized you! Well, Sally, you want to give yourself up for Pleasant Jim?"

"Yes."

"He'd never let a woman pay that price for him."

"He doesn't care," said the girl bitterly. "All that he cares about are horses. He likes the Leinster Gray better than he likes any man or woman."

"But what sort of a price?" said the marshal. "You want me to make Jim Pleasant a free man. Well, it might be done by getting a pardon from the governor, you know. It might even be worth while. But it would have to be an equal value in exchange. What have you done, Sally?"

"I'll tell you a few of the main things," said the girl. "I did the inside work in the Ponting robbery. I brought the Cushing emeralds through without customs. I—"

"You did the Cushing job! And they always thought it was the old man—"

"I used him for a sort of a blind and he didn't know that he was being used. I got to Duncan and Leicester the tools they used when they broke jail—"

"How did you do it? How did you manage that?"

"I'll write it all out. I'll confess all of those things, Marshal Lee. And a lot more. Oh, a lot more. That's not even half of the headliners, because I've been a bad one! But will I do to take the place of Jim Pleasant?"

The marshal was silent, moistening his lips.

Then he murmured: "Ponting—Sally, will you sit down here and write that confession?"

"I will."

"There's a fountain pen. There's a stack of paper. And you can have all the time in the world! Want to start?"

"First—would I do to take the place of Jim Pleasant?"

"Sally," said the marshal, "the brutal truth is that Fisher has withdrawn his complaint; there'll be no pressing of the robbery charge—and the worst that stands against him is an accusation of passing a thousand of counterfeit. And as a matter of fact, we all who are in the know understand that he never dreamed it was counterfeit! Write the confession, Sally!"

And Sally sat down to write.

So it was that a smoke signal brought big Jim Pleasant to the rock of The Three Sisters, where he found young Lew Fisher waiting for him.

"It's all fixed," reported Lew. "All you got to do is to ride up the valley to your farm. That's all. You'll find the same two greasers there that was running the place before—"

"No, I won't," said Pleasant Jim with a grin. "One of

those greasers is south of the Rio, already. But tell me on the level, Lew, is it all fixed?"

"It's all fixed," said Lew Fisher. "You might as well ride right on down through Fisher Falls, and stop off at the marshal's office there. He wants to see you to arrange a couple of things."

Down through the valley, towards Fisher Falls they rode. And a strange ecstasy swept up through the body and the brain of Pleasant Jim as he approached those lights and began to feel that they were not like hostile eyes watching him.

They hardly had entered Fisher Falls when he was recognized by the silver beauty of the Leinster Gray and the grand manner of that noble horse.

A cloud of small boys instantly closed around them. They were in danger of trampling the fearless youngsters under foot; and then men and women came out. Windows and doors were filled, and a wide wave of murmuring went through and through Fisher Falls.

They passed the imposing front of the bank, and behold! the door opened and there was President Fisher standing forth with the broadest of smiles and with extended hand.

Pleasant Jim waved to him but did not pause.

"I'd rather shake hands with the devil," he said bitterly to Lew.

And so they went on until they came to the office of the marshal.

He stood at the door of his office and waved the others back. Only Pleasant Jim advanced to meet him; and formally they shook hands. The crowd in the distance shouted.

"I suppose that I ought to say that I'm glad to see you back," drawled Sam Lee. "Anyway, Pleasant, you've been bought and paid for, and you're free."

"Bought and paid for?" repeated Pleasant sternly. "What you mean by that, Sam Lee?"

"The law can't give something for nothing," said the marshal. "So it gives up you and it takes the girl, instead. She's written out a full confession—"

And he opened the door of his office.

Pleasant, springing in, saw the pale face of Sally, on the farther side of the chamber, pressed into a corner.

"Sam Lee, you traitor! You traitor!" she cried. "You swore that you wouldn't tell!"

"She come down here to sort of drink up the sight of you and to hear you and to see you," said Sam Lee, with something like a sneer. "She wanted to enjoy the sight of magnificent Jim Pleasant ridin' in to the freedom that she'd paid for with the rest of her life in jail. So she swore me not to show her to you. But I thought that maybe you was man enough to sort of want to have a look at her. And here she is!"

"Get out of the room!" said Pleasant Jim, and he swept the marshal back towards the door, and then advanced upon the girl.

"The governor sent this," said the marshal. "Maybe you'd better see it."

And he slammed the door heavily behind him as he went out.

"That means something!" said Sally. And she darted forward and picked up the yellow form.

It was a long message: addressed to Marshal Sam Lee.

"USE YOUR OWN DISCRETION. BUT IF THE GIRL IS WILLING TO SACRIFICE HERSELF FOR THE MAN AND THE MAN IS WHAT YOU SAY ABOUT HIM I PROPOSE TO PARDON THEM BOTH IF THEY WILL PROMISE YOU PERSONALLY TO BE GOOD HERE-AFTER. LET ME KNOW DATE OF MARRIAGE."

Half a dozen times their blurred eyes strained through that message, Sally in the arms of Jim Pleasant, holding the paper in shaking hands.

"Call Sam," said Pleasant in a choked voice, at last. "Call Sam Lee, God bless him! I want to promise to be good!"

THE END









